

PLUCK AND LUCK

COMPLETE
STORIES OF ADVENTURE.

Issued Weekly—By Subscription \$2.50 per year. Entered as Second Class Matter at the New York Post Office, November 7, 1895, by Frank Tousey.

No. 376.

NEW YORK, AUGUST 16, 1905.

Price 5 Cents.

THREE CHUMS; OR, THE BOSSES OF THE SCHOOL. *By ALLYN DRAPER.*



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THREE CHUMS

OR,

THE BOSSES OF THE SCHOOL.

By **ALLYN DRAPER.**

CHAPTER I.

TROUBLE IN THE SCHOOL.

"Come here, you! Come here!"

It was Professor Nixon's stentorian voice, ringing out through the big recitation room of Topcliffe Academy.

"Come here, you! Come here!"

With his ears looking bigger than ever, as they always did when his spectacles dropped down on his nose, Professor Nixon stood at the edge of the platform, facing a mixed assemblage of pretty girls and bright boys, pointing at some one in the crowd with his rattan.

"Come here, you!" he repeated, a third time. "Come here!"

"Who in thunder does old muffin-ears mean?" whispered Jack Carleton, the boy who sat in the extreme lower left-hand corner of the recitation room.

"Dunno," answered Mat Andrews, his seat-mate, in the same low tone.

"He's pointing toward the girls."

"That's so."

"I didn't see anything done, did you?"

"No."

"Bother! He's always kickin' up some row or other. I'll lick that feller some day?" muttered Jack, who was trying to study Greek moods and couldn't on account of the noise.

"Miss Caroline Carleton, are you going to obey or not?" roared the principal of the Topcliffe Academy, stepping down from the platform, rattan in hand.

This caught Jack's attention.

Naturally, since Carrie Carleton happened to be his sister, and both happened to be children of Mr. John Carleton, many times a millionaire, president of the Wixfield National Bank, and one of the principal backers of the school.

"Do you mean me, sir?" stammered the very prettiest of the girls on the other side of the room.

"You are well aware that I mean you, Miss Carleton."

"What have I done?" answered Carrie, rather pertly.

"You have broken the rules of the Topcliffe Academy for one thing, and insulted its principal for another."

"You are insulting me now by refusing to obey me."

"But——"

"No interruptions, miss. I ordered you to come to my desk and you refused to obey."

"I—I didn't know you meant me, sir."

"Yes, you did!"

"No, she didn't, if she says so!" roared Jack, springing up. "Don't you tell my sister she lies!"

"Nobody knew what you meant," added Jim Beasley, who, just before the principal turned round, had thrown a peanut at Jack.

Now Jack caught the peanut deftly, and opening it—it was tied around with a bit of string—took out a scrap of paper, which, instead of the usual contents of a peanut shell, reposed inside.

"Let's do it now!" was written on the paper.

Jack tied up the peanut shell again and threw it to Joe Morgan.

Joe caught it, but before he could get the string off Jack was on his feet "sassing" Mr. Nixon.

"Phew! It's a-comin'!" whispered Jim Beasley to his seat-mate, Hen Tucker. "This row ain't going to blow over as the others have done."

Now Prof. Nixon was angry, and Jack was furious. Truth told, neither of them were acting as they should.

If it was improper and undignified to accuse a young lady of falsehood, it was equally so to intimate that so august a personage as the principal of Topcliffe Academy had told an untruth.

From the very start it had been all wrong. But Prof. Nixon had sense enough to restrain himself.

He had seen the peanut throwing, though he pretended not.

"John Carleton, James Beasley, and Joseph Morgan will take their books and stand against the folding doors at the back of the room, and remain there until I tell them to sit down."

Such was the order of the irate principal given in answer to Jack Carleton's impertinent remark.

To the surprise of all present, it was unhesitatingly obeyed.

"It is well!" said Prof. Nixon slowly, adjusting his spectacles

"There seems to be some question as to who is master of this establishment. The question has existed ever since I took charge of Topcliffe Academy at the close of the summer vacation some weeks ago. It has got to be settled some time, and we may as well do it now. I am informed on good authority that you three young gentlemen have been known heretofore as the 'Bosses of the School.' Now, although I do not approve of the use of so vulgar a word, I propose on this occasion to employ it, and simply inform you that I do not intend that anyone shall be boss of Topcliffe Academy but myself."

And, having delivered himself of this lengthy speech, Prof. Nixon brought his rattan down upon the nearest desk with a bang.

Profound silence reigned.

The truth is, Prof. Nixon was right.

Under the mild rule of Mr. Carrington, the former principal of Topcliffe Academy, Jack, Jim, and Joe had things pretty much their own way.

Every boy in the room—and the girls, too, for that matter—was wondering what they were going to do.

Things were not as they had been before Prof. Carrington died.

"Now, then, to get back to where we started," thundered the principal, who was beginning to lose control of himself again. "Miss Caroline Carleton, you will step to the platform and take your seat beside my desk."

Carrie looked at Jack, but as he said nothing, she hesitatingly obeyed.

"This is as it should be," sneered the principal, in a provokingly sarcastic tone.

He stepped upon the platform and stood beside the girl, flourishing his rattan.

Was he about to strike her?

So tyrannical had been the brief rule of Prof. Nixon that every scholar in the room believed him capable of it.

It would have been a sorry day for him though, if he had, for the boys of Topcliffe Academy were not accustomed to standing quietly by and seeing girls thrashed.

"Miss Carleton, you will be kind enough to hand me that paper of candy from which you were eating," said the principal, in a most disagreeable tone.

Carrie blushed rosy red, which made her look even prettier than she ordinarily was, but she unhesitatingly obeyed.

"So far so good!" sneered Prof. Nixon, opening the paper. "Chocolate drops! Humph! Bad for the digestion and entirely against the rules. You will now beg my pardon before the school, young miss. After that you may return to your seat."

"But I did not know it was against the rules," answered Carrie. "Prof. Carrington never made any trouble about bringing candy."

"No argument. Obey me."

"I don't understand what you want me to say. I don't see why I should beg your pardon for breaking a rule I didn't know."

"I don't ask that. You accused me of a falsehood. Discipline must be maintained."

"But I didn't intend——"

"No matter what you intended—you did it. You must make a public apology and will save trouble by doing it at once."

"Don't do it, Carrie?" called Jack from the back of the room.

"What! Who dared to say that?" roared Prof. Nixon.

"I did," answered Jack, quietly.

"You did! Good! Very good, sir! I'll thrash you in just about two minutes—just as soon as I get through with your sister. I propose to make it perfectly plain who's boss of this school."

Never before had Prof. Nixon been more thoroughly enraged. If he had stopped to consider he would, have seen that instead of taking the proper method to settle the difficulty, he was doing exactly the right thing to keep it up.

"Now then, Miss Carleton, you'll stand up here and beg my pardon!" he shouted.

"I'm not going to do it," answered Carrie, trying to look very brave.

"But you must."

"I won't!"

"You will."

"I shan't!"

"You shall!"

It really seemed astonishing that a man of Prof. Nixon's education should so far forget himself.

He seized Carrie by the hair and pulled her roughly from her seat.

"Oh, oh, oh!" screamed Carrie.

"Peanuts!" yelled somebody at the back of the room.

Was it a preconcerted signal?

Really, it looked that way.

Whizz!

Bang!

Crash!

In an instant books, slates, and ink-stands were flying.

Every boy was on his feet.

They were pelting the principal with whatever missile came nearest to hand.

CHAPTER II.

BREAKING AWAY.

"Down with old Nix!"

"Break his head!"

"Smash him!"

"Whallop the man who dares to lick the girls!"

Possibly Professor Jeremiah Nixon, principal of Topcliffe Academy, needed a sample of pandemonium as a preparation for the future.

Certainly he was getting it now.

The whole school was in an uproar, and inside of three minutes the principal a prisoner. Trouble which had been brewing ever since the fall term opened had now reached a climax.

Secret insubordination had broken out into open rebellion, and, truth told, Professor Nixon had nobody but himself to blame.

"Hold up, fellows! Hold up! We must go slow!" called Jack, addressing himself to the boys who held Professor Nixon.

"We won't have him!"

"We'll all leave Topcliffe Academy first."

"We want another teacher!"

"Run him out!" shouted a dozen voices all at once.

Unfortunately some boarders were taken, it was patronized mostly by pupils residing in Topcliffe village and in Wixfield, a large town about three miles away.

If there had been any other male teacher about the premises Professor Nixon might have fared better. But there wasn't.

The principal and two lady assistants, who stood surveying the strange scene aghast, constituted the entire force.

Meanwhile Professor Nixon, realizing his absurd position wisely held his tongue.

"What shall we do?" yelled Charlie Jencks, who enjoyed the reputation of being the dumbest boy in school.

"Let's put him in Purgatory to start with!" cried Jim Wadley. "We can't talk about it with him here."

ers shall be held strictly responsible," protested the principal, speaking calmly, though his face was white with rage.

"To purgatory! To purgatory!" shouted a dozen voices at once.

Now, purgatory was a long, narrow room, on one side of the main hall, used for the storage of broken desks and rubbish generally.

It wasn't by any means a pleasant place, for it only had one window, and that was so high up from the floor that no ordinary man could reach it, and so small that it admitted scarcely any light.

Yet, disagreeable as it was, many a boy had been made to pass hours in it as punishment—particularly since Professor Nixon took charge of the school.

In a moment they had run the principal into this dismal den. In spite of some protests from the timid ones, the door was locked on the outside, Jim Beasley pocketing the key.

"Let me out! let me out!" roared Professor Nixon, who seemed to have lost his temper again, and he began to beat on the door furiously.

"Let's go outside," cried Jack. "I've got a plan to propose."

All hands, boys and girls too, now rushed out upon the broad lawn in front of the school.

Jack, who had not attained his position as one of the three bosses of the school without earning it, leaped upon the little music stand where the six boys who constituted the school band gave amateur concerts on Wednesday evenings while the pleasant weather lasted.

"Ladies and gentlemen!" he shouted. (Jack was leader of the school debating club, and considered himself quite a speaker.) "Ladies and gentlemen, fellow pupils of Topcliffe Academy!"

"Hear, hear!" yelled Jim Beasley.

"When in the course of human events it becomes necessary——"

"No Fourth of July speech, Jack!" cried a voice. "Come to the point, old man!"

"To which I was coming when the gentleman interrupted me. Since the tendency of the present age is toward levity—I mean brevity—let me say at once, and in as few words as possible——"

"Cut it short!" yelled someone else. "Cut it short, Jack!"

Positively it sounded like Joe Morgan's voice, but Jack could hardly believe that.

For years Joe had been one of his dearest friends.

"What I was going to suggest," he continued, dropping into ordinary tones, for the thought that Joe was making fun worried him, "was that we borrow a couple of Mr. Downs' big farm wagons, and all go up to our camp on Mink Mountain. We can take Toby along with us to cook, and Mrs. Sandford, the housekeeper, to do the respectable. She'll go, I'm sure, for she hates old Nixon. How's that, boys? Girls, what do you say?"

"It's boss," cried Jim Beasley, throwing up his hat.

"Bang up!" yelled Will Edgar.

"I think it's just too splendid for anything," exclaimed Carrie Carleton.

"I'm sure it'll be delightful," chimed in Susie Simpkins.

"Oh, girls, won't we have fun," rippled Tillie West.

"How about the lady teachers?" asked Joe Morgan.

"We will go, too," spoke up Miss Carpenter, who with her associate, Miss Lott, had joined the crowd.

"While we don't exactly approve of all this, young ladies and gentlemen, we've concluded to join you, for only yesterday we sent in our resignation. It is impossible for us to stay here while Professor Nixon manages this school."

"Hooray! Hooray for Miss Carpenter!"

Hats went up, handkerchiefs waved.

"Hi, yi! Won't we have fun!" grunted Toby, the darky cook of the boarding house. "Dere's a few watermillions left in de tree-acre lot, an' dis chile'll tote 'em. 'Sides dat, I'll ketch every chicking in de roost."

"Say, Jack, I'm afraid you're going to get us into a lot of trouble," whispered Joe Morgan when Jack came down from the grand stand. "What will my father say to all this?"

"Now, Joe, don't you be the only kicker. Hark! There goes old Nixy banging away on purgatory door again—it does a fellow good to hear him."

"That's all right. I mean what I say just the same."

"What's the matter with my father cutting up rusty as well as yours?"

"Your father!" retorted Joe, sneeringly, "your father is——"

"What was Joe Morgan about to say?"

Jack did not find out just then, for Jim Beasley came suddenly up and interrupted them.

"But what could he say against Jack's father?"

Mr. Carlton was not only the richest man in Wixfield, president of the bank, pillar in the church and all that, but was universally liked for his good nature and great charity to the poor.

It worried Jack a little, though, and he determined to question Joe further as soon as he could get the chance.

For a long time back something had been disturbing his father's mind, and he knew it.

Just now Mr. Carleton was away—had been for a week, and Jack didn't know where.

If his mother had been alive he might have been informed on this point, but Mrs. Carleton had died years before, and Jack and Carrie, as a matter of convenience, boarded at the school, seldom seeing their father oftener than once a week.

"Say, you fellows mustn't quarrel whatever you do," said Jim Beasley, who never quarreled with anybody. "What you kickin' about, Joe?"

"He's afraid we'll get into trouble if we go to Mink Mountain," said Jack.

"Let him stay home if he don't like it, then."

"No, I'm going," said Joe, very decidedly.

"Then go over to Mr. Downs and get the wagons; you know him better than the rest of us, and as your governor holds a mortgage on his farm he won't dare say no."

Jim was right.

Mr. Downs would have liked very much to say no, but instead of that he said yes.

Great preparations were now undertaken.

Toby cleaned out the watermelon patch and the chicken roost, and emptied the pantry beside.

Mrs. Sandford, after a few objections, was forced to yield. Nobody gave the slightest thought to Prof. Nixon.

Certainly it is no pleasant thing to be the unpopular principal of a school.

He could not get out of purgatory alone, and it was determined to leave him there until the time came to start, and then send the key back by Jimmy Downs, the farmer's son, with instructions to let the principal out.

This was done.

At two o'clock three big farm wagons rolled away from Topcliffe Academy taking the road leading up Mink Mountain, a hill some six hundred feet high, which rose above the surrounding country at a distance of about five miles from the school.

The first wagon contained the Academy band, consisting of Mat Andrews, cornet, Rame Crow, piccolo, Len Drew, trombone, and Hen Tucker, drum.

The band had on their gay red and blue uniforms, and presented quite an imposing appearance.

Next came the wagon carrying the female contingent—a little crowded perhaps—with Toby, in high good humor, as driver, his face shining like a newly-polished stove.

The third wagon Joe Morgan drove and Jack and Jim rode with him. There were four other younger fellows in this wagon, which was a small affair compared with the rest.

"Now, then, boys, let her go!" shouted Jim, when all was ready.

"Ti-r-r-a! Ti-r-ra! Tir-rar-a!"

"By Jinks! Mat's giving his old cornet an extra twist?" cried Joe.

Meanwhile the trombone joined in and Hen commenced to thump on the drum for all he was worth, and away went the wagons around the corner of the academy building with a rush.

"Stop! Stop!" shouted a dismal voice, as the last wagon passed the little window which furnished all the light there was to be had in Purgatory when the door was shut.

"By George, there's old Nixey!" roared Jim.

"Where?" cried Jack and Joe together.

Jim pointed to the window.

There was Professor Nixon with his head out. It would have been impossible to have got his body through.

"You shall be made to pay for this!" he roared. "I'll have every one of you arrested! You'll see!"

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed Jim. "Take it cool, old man. You'll be let out when you've served your time!"

"Say, Nixey, how long are you in for?" piped Will Edgar, whose voice was tremendously shrill.

"Come back! Come back and unlock the door!" shouted the principal, furiously. "You'd better do it!"

He wagged his head so in his rage that his spectacles dropped off, which, of course, only made him more furious than before.

"John Carleton, I order you to let me out!" he roared, when Jack only laughed.

"You'll get out! Never fear," answered Jack.

"Have a care, young man! Have a care!"

"Have a cigar? No, thank you, I don't smoke!" called Jack, pretending not to understand.

"But you'll understand fast enough before I get through with you, you young brat of a bank thief!" shouted the imprisoned principal, as the wagon rolled out of hearing.

Jack Carleton just caught the last words.

Not then did he grasp their meaning.

He thought it was just because Professor Nixon was mad that he used the expression.

Meanwhile the band was banging away at "Off She Goes."

Down the hill the wagons went with a rush, and sweeping through Topliffe like a whirlwind, bringing every one out to stare at them, they started on the mountain road.

"Say, Jack, that was a nasty fling old Nixey had at your father," said Joe, after they had been climbing the hill for about half an hour. "If it had a-been me I declare I'd a-gone back and licked him."

"Oh, pshaw! He was mad—he didn't know what he was saying," replied Jack.

"What's the reason he didn't?" said Joe, giving the horse a cut.

"What do you mean by that, Joe Morgan?"

"Mean what I say. Nixey's up to snuff—you ain't."

"You'll have to explain yourself, Joe," said Jack, setting his teeth and getting white about the nostrils—a sure sign that he was terribly angry.

"Say, fellows, don't quarrel," pleaded Jim, looking very much disturbed.

"Oh, nobody wants to quarrel with him," sneered Joe. "He ain't worth it. Everybody knows his dad has robbed the Wix field bank and sloped. It was town talk last night, and—"

But Joe never got any further.

"Liar! Say another word against my father if you dare!" cried Jack, flinging himself furiously upon his former friend.

Trouble between these three chums had been brewing a long time.

"Don't! Don't!" shouted Jim Beasley.

"Take that, Joe Morgan," hissed Jack, dealing Joe a terrible crack under the left ear.

The climax had come.

It was a bad beginning for old chums to quarrel.

It boded no good for the breaking away of the school.

CHAPTER III.

THE LONE HUT ON THE MOUNTAIN.

"Don't hit him! Don't hit him foul!"

"I'll hit him if I please. Take your hand off of me, Jim Beasley!"

"For Heaven's sake, Joe! You'll kill him!"

Whack!

"Phew! He's a goner!"

In this last exclamation every boy in the wagon, except Joe Morgan, joined.

"Great heavens! You've killed Jack!" groaned Jim Beasley. "Stop the wagon, you blamed murderer! Stop till I get out!"

"Let him go to pot!" snarled Joe Morgan.

He gave his horses a cut, sending them bounding up the steep path.

This did not deter Jim, however, for he sprang over the wheel and fell sprawling.

Up in an instant, he plunged into the thick bushes which overhung a steep, precipitous descent on the right of the road, and disappeared.

What was the row?

Why, nothing more serious than the fact that Joe Morgan's blow had sent Jack Carleton flying out of the wagon.

Striking the road Jack had rolled over the edge of the precipice before he could save himself.

Bad for Jack.

So much for letting Joe get him foul.

Jim Beasley lost no time in following, as we have seen, but Joe, furiously angry, refused to stop the horses, and threatened to lick any boy who interfered with him.

The road was frightfully steep, and with the precipice still yawning beside them as a warning, and not another boy in the wagon dared to jump.

Meanwhile the other wagons were pushing on up the steep ascent, wholly oblivious to what had occurred.

"Nonsense! He ain't hurt, and there ain't any danger either," snarled Joe, as an excuse. "It ain't more than forty feet down to the creek there, and a soft swamp to fall in. Let 'em get along the best they can."

It is astonishing how mean and cruel some boys can be when they are angry—it is indeed.

All little fellows, the boys in the last wagon did not dare to oppose Joe.

As they continued up the steep ascent, they listened for the shouts of Jack or Jim behind him—shouts that did not come, but then the trees and bushes were thick.

But where was Jack?

That's just what Jim Beasley meant to find out when he

dashed in among the bushes which at that point overhung the edge of the steep descent.

"Jack! Jack!" he called.

"Hello!" answered Jack's voice from below.

Jim bent over the rocks and looked down.

There stood Jack knee deep in the swamp.

It had turned out precisely as Joe Morgan had predicted, only that instead of forty, Jack's fall had not been over thirty feet.

"Are you hurt?" shouted Jim.

"No," answered Jack, shortly. "Come down here, Jim."

There was no trouble about climbing down.

In a moment Jim stood by his side, for Jack had picked his way out of the swamp and gained the solid ground.

"You don't want to stay here—they'll drive off and leave us," said Jim.

"Let them. You an' me will strike across the hollow here and go up the mountain on the other ridge."

"All right, Jack, if you say so. I say, though, it's a terrible shame."

"What's a shame?"

"That you and Joe should quarrel."

"Say, Jim, do you know anything about it?" demanded Jack, in hollow tones.

"About your father? No, not a blame thing. I don't believe it, Jack——"

"I won't believe it, and yet——"

"What?"

"Nothing."

"Oh, Joe was only trying to pick a muss with you because he wants to boss this whole business."

"He wouldn't be so mean, Jim, as to accuse my father just for that."

"Dunno. Joe'll do most anything when he's mad. He's been away off these last few days."

"Let him look out. I ain't through with him yet," said Jack, in a strained voice. "Come on, old fellow, we'll beat them all up to the camp by a path I know."

Now, the path that Jack Carlton didn't know on Mink Mountain would certainly have puzzled an Indian to discover.

Ever since the Topcliffe boys built their camp on the mountain, Jack had been piloting people up to it.

Jim had such absolute confidence in him that he never stopped to look where they were going, but just followed on.

They were attempting a new road, though, and Jack's mind was pretty well disturbed.

"Say, ain't we going to get out of these woods pretty soon?" demanded Jim, about an hour later, most of which time had been spent in pushing through the thick forest which covered that part of Mink Mountain beyond the creek.

"We ought to be out now—ought to have struck the path at least twenty minutes ago," answered Jack, moodily. "We've taken a wrong turn somewhere, I am afraid."

"I should say we had."

"You ain't scared, are you, Jim?"

"It's getting dark. Do you know it?"

"Oh, it's only the trees are thicker. We'll come to the path pretty soon."

But they didn't.

Neither did they come out where they could get a view of their surroundings.

Everywhere thick hemlocks, spruces, and lofty pines were about them.

"Say, Jack, we're lost!" panted Jim at last. "I swan I don't believe I can go much further. I've been slippin' around on these pine needles till I am all played out."

"Begins to look so, Jim, but we've got to get to the top of the mountain some time, you know."

"But it's such a deuce of a long time coming."

"Think it's coming now. Don't you see it's lighter ahead?"

They pushed on for about ten minutes, coming out suddenly at last upon a narrow ledge of rock which commanded an extensive view for miles around.

"Great Scott! we've got over onto Plum Mountain!" exclaimed Jack. "We're miles out of our way!"

"Thunder! You don't say so!"

"Fact. Come on."

"Where to!"

Jack pointed.

"Don't you see? There's a hut. We'll inquire the way."

"Now who in the name of sense ever thought of building camp up here?" exclaimed Jim.

He saw right ahead of him in the direction indicated by Jack's finger a small hut rudely constructed of logs, with a piece of stove-pipe thrust through the window for a chimney.

"Whose camp is it, Jack?"

"Blest if I know."

"Mebbe it's the leather man's."

Before Jack had time to answer the door of the hut was suddenly thrown open and a tall gentleman wearing gray side whiskers and a high white hat came springing out.

At the sight of the two boys he stopped short, throwing out his hands in amazement.

"Jack! Why, Jack!" he exclaimed.

"Great heavens, Jim, it's my father!" Jack Carleton breathed.

"Go back! Go back, Jack, you have ruined me!" cried Mr. Carleton. "Great heavens, boy, what ill wind blew you here? We are lost! Lost! Lost!"

CHAPTER IV.

THE LEATHER MAN.

"There he is! There he is!"

"Where?"

"There! Don't you see?"

"I see the leather man, but I don't see him."

"He's there, though. He seems to be looking for somebody."

"Perhaps it's the leather man."

"I don't know who it is and I don't care, but I must get to him. Come, Jim, old man, help me. Poor father. He must be off his base to act so."

Jack Carleton was the speaker, and it is only necessary to mention that Jim Beasley was around to know that he was the listener.

Jim always listened when Jack was speaking, but we are obliged to admit that Jack was not always as thoughtful with Jim.

The scene was Plum Mountain, where we left the boys at the close of the last chapter, when coming upon the lonely hut they so unexpectedly encountered Jack Carleton's father.

And it will doubtless be remembered how strangely Mr. Carleton acted upon that occasion. How he began to shout out about being "lost" and "ruined," acting, in short, in the most mysterious sort of way.

But the next act of the Wixfield bank president was still more mysterious.

Without another word to Jack he plunged into the thicket and disappeared.

"Stop him! Help me to stop him, Jim!" Jack shouted.

Easier said than done.

It was getting pretty dark by this time, and the thickets on that part of Plum Mountain were pretty dense.

Jack and Jim, after a moment of indecision, sprang after Mr. Carleton, but the banker had got a good start, and they did not catch up with him.

Crashing through the thicket, they presently came out upon another of those broad projecting ledges for which Plum Mountain is noted.

A sudden exclamation burst from the lips of both Jack and Jim.

Below them, perhaps fifty feet down, ran another ledge, and they could see hurrying across it a short, stout old man, with long hair and long, tangled beard.

He was an amazing looking object from the fact that from head to foot he was dressed in rudely made garments of leather. Leather pants, leather coat, even a leather hat, and the boys around Wixfield always declared he had a leather shirt beside.

"The leather man!" exclaimed Jack and Jim together.

"By George! so it is," added Jack. "But where is father?"

That, to Jack, was the all-important question now, for every one knew the leather man as a harmless sort of lunatic, who for years had tramped about the country, appearing at unexpected times in unexpected places, and disappearing in the same mysterious way.

As he had never been known to speak to anyone, no one knew who the leather man was, and it is needless to add that the boys were all tremendously afraid of him.

It startled Jack not a little to see him now, but it startled him more to suddenly catch a glimpse of his father on the lower level rushing madly after him.

In a moment both had disappeared among the trees.

"Oh, Jim, what shall we do?" gasped Jack, so disturbed that Jim actually thought he was going to cry.

"Blest if I know, old man! What do you s'pose ails your father, anyhow?"

"Give it up, Jim. Come on! We must catch him. He surely don't know what he's about, and if I know anything about the weather there is a big storm coming on."

There was no doubt about the last.

The sky had clouded over some time before, and lightning had been playing about the horizon.

Even now as Jack spoke a deep, low rumble of distant thunder made itself heard.

The boys now went dashing along the ledge, looking for a place to descend, but the rocks were so steep that they did not dare to make the attempt.

"I'm going down here, Jim!" cried Jack, pausing suddenly at a point where the ledge was more broken.

"Hold on! Hold on! You can't get down there!" Jim exclaimed.

"Yes, I can."

Without an instant's hesitation Jack swung himself over the edge of the precipice, and dropped, catching a tree about six feet lower down, after which he managed to climb the rest of the distance to the ledge below.

Jim, more timid, however, lacked the courage to make the attempt.

"Come on!" yelled Jack.

"Can't do it," replied Jim. "It's no use, Jack, I can't. Don't wait for me, old man. I'll get down somehow, and will catch up in a minute."

But Jack had no idea of waiting.

He was too much excited for that.

Leaving Jim to get down the best way he could, he darted on in the direction his father had taken a moment before.

Now a thousand fears assailed him.

Of course, he could not forget Joo Morgan's insinuations—even what Prof. Nixon had said came rushing back to his mind.

Then he remembered his father's strange conduct during the past few weeks; his moody silence, his erratic moves, and unexplained absences.

"What did he mean by saying that I had ruined him?" Jack asked himself. "Why is he here on Plum Mountain when everybody supposed he had gone to the city on business?"

But Jack, as he ran on, asked himself these questions in vain.

At first he was able to follow his father's footprints in the thick bed of moss which covered the rocks, but when, presently, he got into the woods, this was no longer possible.

All was as dark as Egypt now, but Jack pushed bravely on.

"Father! Father!" he shouted.

There was no answer.

In fact, there was no sound of any kind, save the occasional growling of thunder and the shriek of a night-hawk among the tall hickory trees.

It is unnecessary to say that Jack grew more and more alarmed.

Suddenly, however, he found himself with something else to think about, for something happened that drove all other thoughts out of the boy's head.

Coming out of the woods Jack dashed on without looking where he went, and before he had time to find out he suddenly found himself treading on nothingness.

But for his wonderful presence of mind that moment would assured have been Jack Carleton's last, for he had walked off of a steep precipice of unknown height, and was falling down into the darkness below.

"Jim! Oh, Jim! Help!" poor Jack yelled when first he felt himself going.

The exclamation was involuntary.

So was the instinct which made him clutch at a projecting bush as he went down.

Fortunately the bush was firmly rooted, and able to hold him.

There Jack hung, suspended as it were between heaven and earth.

"Jim! Jim!" he shouted.

Just then the lightning flashed.

It showed Jack the cliff close beside him.

With a bold spring he clutched at it—caught it, and was just about to pull himself up, when to his horror a great hairy face was thrust close to his own.

It was the leather man.

Jack recognized him at a glance.

In his hand he held a glittering hatchet raised ready to strike.

"Boy, why do you follow me?" he hissed. "Don't you know that I own this mountain? No one has any right here but me."

Jack's eyes dilated with fear—a horrible sensation seized him—his brain was all in a whirl.

"Don't strike him! Don't strike him!" shouted a voice directly behind the leather man.

It was Jim who now came dashing out of the woods, too late, though, to accomplish anything.

In fact, it was only at that instant that Jim, who had at last succeeded in getting down, saw his friend's perilous position.

His shout was worse than useless, for it only seemed to enrage the leather man.

Jim saw the hatchet descend, and then came a cry, and the leather man, with indescribable swiftness, went gliding off among the trees.

Filled with horror, Jim rushed to the edge of the precipice without making even an attempt to follow the wretch who had done the awful deed.

He thought only of Jack, whose cry was still ringing in his ears.

But when he reached the spot nothing was to be seen of Jack.

Jim could not even be certain of the precise spot where the tragedy had taken place.

"Jack! Jack! Oh, Jack!" he called, throwing himself flat upon the rock and bending down.

There was no answer.

The wind swept through the tree-tops with a mournful sighing, and just then a louder clap of thunder came.

"Oh, Jack, Jack!" groaned Jim, drawing away from the edge of the precipice in horror.

It seemed to Jim as though the end of all things had come—as though he cared to live no longer with Jack Carleton dead.

CHAPTER V.

THE ATTACK ON THE QUARRYMAN'S HUT.

"Stop! Stop! I want to get out and look for Jack!" cried Charlie Jenks, one of the younger boys left in the wagon Joe Morgan was driving.

"Hold your jaw, Jenks, unless you want to get a crack with the horsewhip," growled Joe, who certainly was in a desperately bad frame of mind.

He gave the horses a vicious lashing which sent them up the steep incline on the run.

"You haven't any right to leave Jack and Jim," growled Jenks, but he didn't say it loud enough for Joe to hear, and as for the rest of the boys—all little chaps—who were in the wagon, they were too much cowed to think of interfering with anything Joe Morgan did.

"Tell you what it is, Jenks, and the rest of you fellows," said Joe, when after a few moments they came within hearing of the next wagon. "If you dare to breathe a word of what's happened I'll punch the whole head off of every mother's son of you. There ain't no danger of Jack's being hurt. The swamp down there is softer than his head."

Now whatever thoughts the boys may have had after this brutal speech were interrupted by a loud crash suddenly heard, ahead of them, followed by shouts, screams and other sounds not to be described.

"Thunder! The other wagon has broke down, sure as fate!" cried Joe, urging his team forward.

A turn in the road showed the boys in a moment how near Joe had jumped at the truth.

There was one of the other wagons on its side with the frightened horses dashing madly down the mountain toward them.

The hind axle had broken, and although by rare good luck no one was hurt by the overturn, it seemed likely to prove a very serious affair, for the horses had turned sharply and started for home as frightened horses will.

On they came, the rattle of the broken vehicle adding to their terror.

Joe's horses began to rear and plunge.

"Jump! Jump, fellows!" yelled Joe, seeing that a collision was inevitable.

The boys piled out of the wagon in a hurry, and Joe instead of acting the part of a true sailor and sticking to his ship in the last, deserted the reins and leaped out, too.

Perhaps it was wisest.

In an instant the crash came.

Joe's wagon lost a wheel, and at the same moment the rearing horses managed to break the pole, and the traces snapped like thread.

Whirling about, the frightened beasts now joined their companions in their mad rush down the mountain-side.

"Oh, dear me! Oh, dear me! This is just awful!" groaned Mrs. Sanford, the housekeeper, who had been one of the party in the forward wagon. "I wish I'd never came."

"Golly, ma'am, you'd orter bress de Lord dat yo' neck ain't broke," cried Toby, his eyes blinking. "Dis here's de very worstest I ever did see."

"Where's my brother Jack?" asked Carrie Carleton, who was one of the party, as the boys from the other wagon came up.

"Gone after de hosses, I s'pose, miss," answered Toby. "I seen Mass' Joe a-goin' suah."

This explanation satisfied Carrie for the time being; indeed there were too many other things to think about, and too much confusion generally to permit the girl to think any more about it just then.

Everybody was in a pickle. The girls—there had been no one but girls, Toby, and the boy who drove in that wagon—were screaming and chattering, while Toby's tongue was running at mill-race speed, and the little boys from the other wagon only made confusion more confounded by their excited chatter.

Meanwhile Joe and the driver of the forward wagon had started after the horses.

To make matters still worse, there was the thunder storm coming up.

"Lawful sakes', girls, what shall we ever do?" groaned Mrs. Sandford. "We are too far up to go down, and I know I never can climb up with the rheumatism in my left leg—limb I mean—since two years come 'lection day; and—Toby, you black rascal, quit laughing, or I'll heave something at you. It's bad enough as it is, without that."

"Golly, Miss Sandford, I don't mean no dis'spect, ma'am. Yo' needn't have no fears long's Toby's wif yo'. What I suggest is to git on a little way funder to do old quarry house near de tippin' stone, an' wait dar till Massa Joe Morgan an' de rest comes up."

"Can't you overtake the other wagon and make them understand what has happened?" suggested Carrie.

"No, miss, can't be did. I've dun got de dropsy in me right leg—beg pardon, Miss Sandford, I meanter say limb—an', anyhow, I couldn't do it ef I hadn't. Come on, young ladies, yo'd better be spry, les' yo' wanter get yer ribbons spiled, take old Toby's wud fo' dat."

It was a fact that the sky did look most threatening. Rain seemed bound to come.

By the time the party reached the quarrymen's camp it had grown more so. Yet for all that, the storm held off for the best part of an hour, and then broke with unusual fury.

Meanwhile Joe Morgan and the boys who had gone with him in pursuit of the horses, did not return.

"Mighty strange what's become of dem," exclaimed Toby, as a terrific crash of thunder shook the hut. "Guess dey's dun got demselves in someurs out of de rain, anyhow—dey do no' nuff fo' dat."

Toby was busy arranging an impromptu supper upon an old wooden table when he spoke, having clung to one of the provision baskets when the crash came.

He had previously built a roaring fire in the old stove and closed the wooden shutters to keep the rain out.

As for the girls, they all sat about the fire on the wooden

benches once used by the rough quarrymen having a jolly, good time.

The fact was, no place better adapted for the situation than the hut could possibly have been selected.

It was a small affair built of rough boards, standing right at the edge of the great granite quarries for which Mink Mountain was famous.

The stone-cutting business had been dull that year, and therefore it happened that the hut was deserted.

Never before had it contained so jolly a crowd, probably, as sat down to the table now.

"Oh, pshaw, girls! You needn't worry about my brother," exclaimed pretty Carrie Carleton, tossing her curls coquettishly. "I guess Jack knows enough to look out for himself, rain or no rain. Mrs. Sandford, is there any moral objection to my having another piece of that cake?"

"Oh, girls! I'm awful glad Miss Lott and Miss Carpenter were in the forward wagon," simpered Susie Simpkins. "They would be like a wet blanket if they were in here."

"Golly! Guess dere blankets would be wet less dey wuz inside," grinned Toby. "Hear it! Never was sich a storm sence Noah's flood, I guess. Miss Sandford, it was lucky yo got yo' washin' in afore you left de 'cademy."

"Hark!" cried Mrs. Sandford, suddenly. "For gracious sakes, girls, what was that?"

Certainly the noise was startling.

Nearly every girl in the room screamed.

It was a wild yell, or rather a series of yells, almost war whoops, heard above the rattle of the rain upon the roof.

"Great grief, mum!" cried Toby, "dat can't be de boys!"

"It's Jack, Joe, and Jim, of course!" said Carrie. "Open that door, Toby. They must be wet through."

"Say, Miss Carrie, I hate most mightily to go agin' yo,' but 'scretion is de bes'. Dere's been dead loads of tramps hangin' 'bout Mink Mountain lately, an'— Good golly! Dar it goes agin'!"

The yells had been repeated, and louder.

Charlie Jenks said something about Indians, and set all the girls to screaming, except Carrie Carleton, who laughed at the idea.

Meanwhile Toby had cautiously crept to the door and opened it, thrusting his woolly head out into the storm.

No sooner had he done so than with a yell of terror he drew his head in again and slammed the door.

"D-d-don't be afraid, leddys, but it's Injuns!" he groaned. "Dere's a hundred an' nineteen of 'em, wif dere heads all stuck full of tommyhooks and dere belts wif turkey fathers! Oh, my good golly! What shall we do?"

CHAPTER VI.

THE TIPPING STONE FALLS.

"Indians! Oh, good gracious! Oh, my land! We shall all be scalped!" screamed Mrs. Sandford. "Toby! Toby! Lock the door."

"Guess dere ain't no lock onto it, mum, but dere's a big wooden bar, what's better," chattered Toby.

His hand shook so he could hardly set the bar into place.

Meanwhile all the girls were screaming, and the little boys were not much better.

Whoop after whoop was heard outside, and in a moment came someone banging on the door, and a gruff voice demanding that it be opened at once.

"Get out of dis, Mister Indian. I'se

got a cannon in hyar. Yo'll make yo'self mighty scarce ef yo' knows when yo're well off."

"Don't let me be scalped! Oh, don't let me be scalped!" groaned Mrs. Sandford.

"Te, he! 'Twon't hurt her much if she is scalped!" tittered Tilly West. "Every girl in school knows she wears a wig."

"That's the reason—she's afraid we'll find it out," whispered Carrie. "I don't believe it's Indians, girls. What nonsense! Of course, there ain't any Indians round here, except Old Mary, who sells bead baskets over at Wixfield, and—oh—oh—oh—o-o-o-o-h-h!"

Positively every one in the quarryman's hut joined in the cry, and the voice of Mrs. Sandford was the loudest of all.

The cause was not lacking, either.

On either side of the hut were wooden shutters which served as windows, and which, contrary to the usual custom, opened inside.

Now suddenly one of these shutters had been forced open, and a startling apparition appeared in the breach.

"Oh, golly!" roared Toby.

Really, if the man who thrust his head through the window wasn't an Indian, he very strongly resembled a savage of the most bloodthirsty type.

He was a large man, with smooth, dark features, long black hair hung down his shoulders from beneath a curiously constructed cap, ornamented with feathers. In his hand he held a veritable Indian tomahawk, which he brandished in close proximity to Toby's dusky nose.

"Ugh! Ugh! Ugh!" he grunted. "Me big chief! Black man open dat door! I wanter kiss de ladies. Open de door before I snatch you bald-headed! Open it quick."

Somehow this language lacked the pure Indian ring, but nobody noticed that.

"Get out of dat! Get out of dat!" shouted Toby valorously. "I'll defend dese here gals with my life. Kiss 'em, indeed! Take dat! You's ez brack ez I be, every bit."

"Dat" was the toasting fork, which Toby sent shying past the shutter.

"Give it to him, girls! Show him we ain't afraid!" cried Carrie, seizing a loaf of bread from the table and sending it through the window with such unerring aim that it took the Indian squarely in the nose.

Then bread, hard-boiled eggs, and other things flew, the noble savage dodging in and out until Toby, who was pushing bravely against the shutter, managed to close it.

All the girls took a hand in, and with reason felt quite proud of their success, until suddenly the most fearful banging began on the door again as though a great stone was being struck against it.

"Open that door! Open that door!" yelled a loud voice.

"Not much! G'long!" roared Toby in answer, planting his back against the door.

It was no use, though.

The wooden bar was not strong enough to bear everything. Suddenly it gave way and Toby went sprawling.

There was a general scream as five or six men dressed like Indians came tumbling into the hut.

"That's better!" growled the one who had looked through the window. "It's just as I told you, boys. That girl there is Carrie Carleton. Her father is worth a couple of million. We may as well take her along with us, and make the old man pay to get her back."

"You shan't do it!" shouted Charlie Jenks.

Little "sawed-off" that he was, Charlie had true grit, when it was once aroused.

But the Indians brushed him aside as though he had been no more than a mosquito.

While one of their number held Toby at bay with a big rusty horse pistol, the leader seized Carrie, and in spite of her struggles, dragged her screaming from the hut.

Meanwhile two other horse pistols had succeeded in effectually terrifying Mrs. Sandford and the rest of the girls into silence.

Seizing the basket, one of the remaining Indians swept into it all that was eatable. Then all had a kick at Toby, who, as he crouched on his hands and knees on the floor, presented a splendid opportunity, and hurried off out of the hut into the storm followed only by Charlie Jenks, who ran bravely after them, shouting all sorts of vengeance as he went.

For a few moments every one inside the hut remained as if paralyzed.

"Oh, oh, oh!" screamed Susie Simpkins, to whom nobody had said a word, breaking the silence at last. "Oh, I'm so frightened. I'm going to faint!"

"What shall we do?" groaned Mrs. Sandford. "Toby, you coward, get up out of that and do something!"

"Bress de Lord, ma'am, I d'n know what to do! Kean't fight de hull Injun nation nohow. If I'd a-knowed dey wuz Injuns on Mink Mountain dis chile wouldn't neber have come, an'—glory hallelujah! here's Mars Jim Beasley, come jes' in time to save us all from bein' skelped!"

"What is it? What's the matter with you all?" ejaculated Jim, who, all dripping with rain, at this moment came bursting into the hut.

"Injuns! Injuns!" bawled Toby.

"Indians! They've carried off Carrie!" shrilly shrieked Mrs. Sandford and all the girls in a breath.

"Nonsense. There are no Indians around here!" gasped Jim. "Get your wits about you, Toby, and answer me. Has Jack been here?"

"No."

"Where's Joe Morgan?"

"Gone after the horses. We are all broke down an' come in hyar jester——"

"Hold on. Whoever has carried Jack's sister off has got to suffer for it. Which way did they go?"

"They took her down past the tipping stone. I followed them that far!" exclaimed Charlie Jenks, who came rushing in at this moment. "Oh, Jim, do something, for Heaven's sake!"

"Come, Charlie, come!" cried Jim, springing out of the hut. Words cannot paint his excitement.

Failing to find any trace of Jack, Jim had at last succeeded in making his way across the depression between Plum and Mink Mountains, intending to hurry on to Wixfield and get help if by any chance Jack might be yet alive.

The hut lay in his path, and here he was with fresh trouble for the Carleton family staring him in the face.

As they ran he questioned Charlie.

Indians, or someone strongly resembling them, had evidently been at the hut.

The more Charlie explained the more mystified Jim became.

"Hold on! Wait for me!" Toby's voice could be heard shouting after them through the darkness.

Then following it came the screams of the girls, who had naturally objected to being left alone.

"Toby, you go back and take care of the girls!" shouted Jim.

"Now, then, Charlie, what was the last you saw of them?"

"They were making straight for the tipping stone the last I saw," answered Charlie. "I heard you coming, and I thought it was Joe Morgan, so I just ran back to tell you and get your help."

"That's right."

"Who do you think they are, Jim?"

"Tramps," said Jim decidedly, "made up to look like Indians—that's what they are."

The unlikelihood of tramps being able to procure Indian disguises never seemed to suggest itself to Jim Beasley's mind.

"Where's Jack?" asked Charlie, as they ran on.

"Dead, I guess," replied Jim, "and Joe Morgan is responsible for it. Oh, he shall pay for this, Jenks, now you mind."

"There's the tipping stone!" cried Charlie. "They went that way, Jim. Look out you don't go too far."

The caution was not ill-timed.

Right before the boys lay the precipice overhanging the swampy ground into which Jack had fallen, and on its very edge stood a huge boulder so nicely balanced that a child could move it, yet there the stone had stood since the beginning of time.

It was the famous tipping stone of Mink Mountain.

Geologists claimed that it had been brought down from the top of the mountain by ice during the glacial epoch. Again and again it had been written up for the papers; pamphlets had been printed about it; it was known as a great natural curiosity for miles around.

"They must have gone down into the valley by the sheep path over beyond here," exclaimed Jim, when all of a sudden Charlie yelled out:

"There's Jack!"

"Jack! Jack who?" gasped Jim.

"Jack Carleton! Look! look!"

By this time they were pretty close to the tipping stone, and just at the moment Charlie shouted a flash of lightning lit the sky.

"Where did you see him?" cried Jim, for it was as dark as Egypt now, and the thunder was crashing.

"On top of the tipping stone."

Jim felt a cold chill run down his spine.

"You are either crazy or it's his ghost!" he exclaimed.

"Look! look!" cried Charlie, for now the lightning had come again.

It was a strange sight which Jim Beasley witnessed at the moment of that lightning flash.

As the darkness was suddenly illuminated, he distinctly saw Jack Carleton sitting comfortably on the tipping stone, which seemed to be swaying back and forth.

"Jack! Jack!" shouted Jim.

Then came the darkness, and all in an instant a crunching, grinding sound.

Suddenly the immense boulder, which could just be distinguished, toppled over the edge of the precipice, and went crashing into the depths below.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERY OF JACK.

"Well, by thunder!" cried Jim Beasley, as the "tipping stone" tumbled down.

But Charlie Jenks, timid little fellow that he was, seemed too much frightened to speak for several seconds.

"It was Jack sitting on the stone! I saw him!" he gasped, at last.

"Say, Charlie, it couldn't have been Jack, 'coz he's dead," whispered Jim, hollowly.

"But I saw him, Jim."

"So did I, Charlie. So did I, but it wasn't Jack."

"I guess I know Jack Carleton when I see him."

"You only thought you saw him, Charlie, and I thought the same thing."

"I know what I saw. Do you mean to say——"

"That it was Jack's ghost! Charlie, I don't know what to think. I know Jack's dead, and what's more I know it seemed to me that I saw him sitting on that stone when it went down. Now figure it out for yourself."

Jim had already told Charlie about the scene on Plum mountain.

No wonder, after seeing the leather man force Jack over the precipice, Jim thought his chum was dead.

"What shall we do?" asked Charlie. "I don't believe in ghosts, Jim."

"No more do I."

"We ought to do something. It might have been Jack."

"If it was he is dead now."

"Sure—still, we ought to know for certain."

"We'll have to go down into the swamp then, and find out where the tipping stone landed," said Jim. "You go back and tell Toby and the girls, Charlie. I'll look for a good place to climb down."

"But how'll I know where you are?"

"Oh, by George, you've got to go with me. I'll whistle! Of course, you'll not be gone any longer than you can help."

"But how about Carrie?"

"Charlie," said Jim, solemnly, "we can't do anything for Carrie in all this storm; we can't be in two places at once, neither, and I mean to know the truth about Jack."

Ten minutes after that the two boys were climbing cautiously down the precipice at a point a little further up the hill from where the tipping stone fell.

It was tough climbing, and terribly dangerous in the darkness and storm.

No one but a boy or a goat could ever have got down at all.

But Jim and Charlie accomplished it, and a little later were in the narrow, swampy valley between Plum and Mink Mountains, with the rain pelting furiously on their heads.

Now, understand that these so-called mountains were of no great height; they were, properly speaking, nothing but hills.

But to Jim and Charlie they seemed high as the Himalayas that dreadful night, with the thunder crashing and echoing all about them, and the lurid lightning flashing every now and again, only to make the darkness more intense.

"We want to go this way, Charlie," cried Jim, pulling his companion toward the right. "If there's anything left of poor Jack we'll find him near the stone."

"If it was Jack," answered Charlie.

"If it was—yes."

"I know I saw him; that's sure."

"Hark!" cried Jim. "What's that?"

It was a voice shouting somewhere off in the darkness.

"Jack! Jack!" it said. "Jack, come back!"

"Great Scott! who can that be?" gasped Charlie, grabbing Jim by the arm.

"Blest if I know, Charlie. Jack wouldn't be apt to call himself."

"Of course not. Say, Jim, I don't like this."

"Oh, come on. What are you afraid of?"

"But——"

"I don't care who it is. I'm a-going to look for Jack. There are other Jacks in the world beside Jack Carleton. Some one may be lost in the swamp."

But really this strange cry seemed more mysterious to Jim than he was willing to admit.

Keeping along the edge of the precipice the boys hurried forward.

It was too dark to see much, but then the tipping stone was

as big as a young house, as Jim expressed it, so it seemed as though they ought not to miss it.

Nor did they.

After a little search they found it resting in the high grass at the edge of the swamp.

"Jack! Jack!" shouted Jim. "Oh, Jack!"

There was no answer at first, but after a moment a voice further in in the swamp was heard, saying:

"I'm here! I'm lost! For God's sake, Jim, help me out!"

"There he is!" cried Charlie. "There he is!"

"Say, that's not Jack's voice, Charlie."

"It must be."

"But it don't sound a bit like it. Jack! Is that you?"

Jim's last words could have been heard a mile away.

"Yes, yes!" came the answer.

"Are you hurt?"

"No, no!"

"How did you get there? Where are you?"

"In the swamp. For God's sake, help me, Jim!"

"Follow the light!"

Now it was neither Jim's nor Charlie's voice which pronounced these last words, but another voice entirely, deep and hoarse.

Just where it came from the boys could not tell.

At the same moment off in the thickets a light shot up, dimly seen among the bushes.

To say that the boys were perplexed now don't begin to express the way they felt.

"By George, I'm going to find out what all this means," cried Jim. "Come on, Charlie. Follow me."

Unmindful of the spongy nature of the ground, Jim now plunged into the swamp, Charlie following close at his heels.

In a general way they knew the place. It was not a quagmire; there was no actual danger.

The worst that could be said of it was that it was soft ground thickly overgrown with bushes.

But then the boys were wet to the skin already, and could scarcely have made themselves any wetter if they had plunged into a pond.

The light was now before them, and pushing on through the bushes, they made for it.

It did not seem to move, but yet they could not come up with it. The further they went the further off the light seemed to be. Several times Jim had shouted again, but now he could get no answer.

Presently the light disappeared altogether, and it seemed time to call a halt.

"For heaven sake, what can it mean, Jim?" said Charlie. "I don't like this for a cent."

"You like it just as well as I do," growled Jim. "Why in thunder don't Jack answer if he is there?"

"Give it up."

"Where's the light?"

"Give that up, too."

"If it was anybody else but Jack Carleton I'd give the whole thing up. There were two persons here a few minutes ago, that's certain. Now we can't get an answer out of anyone. Blest if it don't stump me."

"Holler again," suggested Charlie.

Jim "hollered" till he was hoarse, but there was not a sound.

"I tell you what it is, Charlie. I don't believe it was our Jack at all," he said at last. "Must have been someone else."

"It begins to look so."

"Most likely it was some hunters lost in the swamp. They have found each other now, and don't give a blame for us."

"By George, I believe you're right—I tell you it can't be

Jack. It couldn't have been him we saw on the rock—Charlie, there's only one thing for us to do, and that's to get back to the girls."

"That's what I say," replied Charlie, and they started forthwith.

But they soon found that it was one thing to get into the swamp, and quite another to get out of it.

For a good half hour they kept on tramping through the bushes with mud to their ankles, and the rain pelting upon them, but they could not find the rocky hillside down which they had come.

"By thunder, we're all turned round, Charlie," said Jim at last. "What are we going to do?"

"That's what I've been wondering, Jim. Guess we're lost."

"There ain't any doubt about it, unless—why, Charlie! Here we are now!"

Suddenly and unexpectedly they had come out right at the foot of a rocky precipice at the top of which—a hundred feet above them, perhaps—twinkled a faint light.

"This ain't the place we came down, Jim," said Charlie, doubtfully.

"Of course it ain't the same identical spot, Charlie, but there is the quarryman's hut up there sure. As long as we can get up to it what difference does it make?"

"That's so; but can we get up there?"

"You bet I can, and you must."

"Of course I'll try it, Jim, but——"

"Oh, there ain't any buts about it. We've got to get back. The girls must be worried to death. Just as soon as we let them know how matters stand we'll start for Topcliffe and get help to look for Carrie and Jack."

Never was there harder climbing than the boys had now.

It seemed to Charlie Jenks as though they would never reach the top, but at last they did, and he joined Jim on a broad ledge of rock within a hundred feet of a small hut in which the light still burned.

Jim was panting for breath to such an extent that he could hardly speak, but he put out his hand and grasped Charlie's arm.

"By thunder, you were right!" he gasped. "This ain't the place, after all."

"Told you so. For Heaven's sake, Jim, where are we?"

"On Plum Mountain."

"You don't mean it! Then we must have crossed the swamp."

"That's just what we did. I've been here before. This is the place where I was with Jack."

"Where you saw the leather man?"

"Yes."

"Gee!"

"Let's come on. I want to see who's inside there."

"S'pose it's the leather man?"

"I don't care if it is. I'm going to see, anyhow."

The boys now crept forward, and reaching the window of the hut nearest to them, Jim, who was ahead, peered through the grimy glass.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated, drawing back suddenly. "Look there, Charlie, look there!"

"What? What is it?" questioned Charlie.

"Look! Look!"

Charlie leaned forward, pressed his face against the glass, and peered into the room beyond.

alive with tramps what would skin the hide off you fer a shillin', now you mark my words."

The farmer was a well-meaning but over-cautious individual, whose house stood by the roadside half-way to Topcliffe.

He was talking to Joe Morgan in the out-house under the festoons of popcorn and sliced pumpkin which hung suspended from the rafters.

Outside it was raining like mad. The farmer declared that he had never known such a storm at that season of the year.

"But I've got to go back," said Joe. "The girls are up there alone with Toby, and one or two of the little chaps. I don't doubt but they're pretty near scared to death by this time."

"All right. Suit yerself. I'll take care of the hosses, an' welcome."

"Do it till morning, and I'll see you paid," replied Joe, as he made a dash out into the storm.

Now was the time when Joe wished that he had not quarrelled with Jack and Jim.

Bent upon overtaking the horses, he had followed them past the ruins of the wagon until he traced them into the farmer's yard.

One of the farmhands it seemed had managed to stop them, and when Joe next saw the animals they were in the stable unharmed.

Then the storm came up while Joe was trying to persuade the farmer to lend him another wagon, which the worthy man positively refused to do.

"Ain't got but one wagon, an' I want that," he said. "Can't do it no way in the world."

Nor was Joe able to talk him into it.

Fate seemed against the boy as he started on his lonely tramp up the hill.

Now before proceeding with our story, we just want to state that Joe Morgan, though headstrong, very jealous, and blest with a most uncertain temper, was not a half bad fellow at heart.

During all their school life Joe, Jim, and Jack had been the firmest of friends.

Of course, they had their quarrels, but they were always promptly made up.

In spite of the fact that the boy had an excellent reason for saying what he had said to Jack at the time this, the worst quarrel they had ever got into, began, Joe was now thoroughly sorry for what had occurred.

"It's a blame shame the way I treated Jack," he muttered, as he plodded along up the hill. "He hasn't done nothing, no matter what they may say about his father. I only wish——"

"Hold on there, young feller! Hold on! Chuck up them paws of your'n or I'll chuck a bullet down yer throat!"

Joe was horribly startled.

The shout had suddenly aroused him from his reflections.

There, right in his path, stood two desperate-looking fellows—ragged and bloated.

Each held a cocked revolver, and, as Joe looked, there were two more men just like them emerging from the bushes on the left.

The prediction of the farmer had come true to the very letter.

Here were the tramps sure enough.

Joe was terribly frightened.

The fact is he did not possess the courage of either Jack or Jim.

He raised his hands just as they told him to, and—let us whisper it—begged the fellows in piteous tones not to shoot.

"Haw, haw, haw!" laughed the foremost of the tramps, a very stout fellow, whose red, bulbous nose shone like a lighthouse in a fog from beneath an old, battered, brimless plug

CHAPTER VIII.

JOE AT LUKE LOCKYER'S.

"You'd better not try it," said the farmer. "Best thing you kin do is ter stop here till it lights up. These ere hills is jest

hat. "Say, baby, does yer mother know yer out? Lets hev what you've got erbout yer now. I've got an appointment to dine with Squire Morgan over to Wixfield, an' don't wanter be late."

"My father!" cried Joe, indignant at the mere insinuation of such a thing. "It's a lie. If my father only knew——"

"Hold up, hold up, Blazer!" cried one of the party. "May I be everlasting jiggered if this ain't Squire Morgan's kid. Here's luck, fer a fact!"

"Is Squire Morgan your father?" demanded Blazer, whose nose seemed to have earned him his nickname, coming close to Joe, and thrusting the revolver in his face.

"Yes, he is! You'll find it out too if you hurt me. Take that thing away! Take it away!"

But before Joe knew what we was about the tramps had him by the arms, and turning out of the road, were hurrying down the hill over the rocks, talking and laughing as they went.

It was no use to show fight against four armed men, and Joe didn't try it.

He tried to make out what they were saying, though, but their talk was so full of slang as to amount almost to a dialect, and being just a shade slow-witted he couldn't make it out at all.

When he attempted to question them the tramps only laughed at him.

Blazer made his refusal to explain more emphatic by giving Joe a smart slap across the face with instructions to "hold his jaw," or he'd be made to "chew glue."

"You're jest the feller we want," he added, "and if you do what we tell you there shan't be no harm come to you out of it. Ef you refuse, why then look out fer squalls."

They were in the forest at the foot of ther hill, now—it was on the other side of the road from the swamp—and Joe saw, rising before them among the trees, an old, ruinous house.

He recognized it instantly as a place known as "Luke Lockyer's," a deserted farm-house which had been for years unoccupied, and had the unenviable reputation of being haunted as well.

Its chimneys had fallen, its roof was full of great gaping holes, while the shingles had dropped off, and where they had not great patches of green moss grew.

Some of the windows still had sashes, others had none. The front door stood wide open at the end of the weed-grown walk, and a light could be seen burning dimly within.

Blazer opened the dilapidated gate, and gave Joe a push through it.

"Get in there, you young dudelet," he said sneeringly. "Go straight for the door, or by time I'll treat you to a taste of lead."

"Don't be a fool, Blazer!" cried one of the others, springing upon Joe, and grabbing him again. "What do you want to let go of him for when you see he's all ready to light out?"

"He dassen't do it!" sneered Blazer. "Get him in somehow, and no more talk."

They dragged Joe unresistingly through the open door and into what had once been the parlor of the old farmhouse.

Here, by the light of a solitary candle, stuck in the neck of a bottle, four or five additional specimens of the tramp tribe were discovered seated on the floor playing poker with a pack of greasy cards.

They greeted the newcomers with a shout, and were all on their feet in an instant.

"Who's his nibs?"

"Who you got there, Blazer?"

"Hello, little step-an'-fetch-it! Got any boodle erbout yer?"

They were all talking at once, and began pulling the prisoner this way and that.

Joe was too badly frightened to speak.

"Hold up!" cried Blazer with a shout. "You fellers don't ketch on to the joke for a cent. This 'er is Squire Morgan's kid. I move we hold him till the squire shells out a thousand or so."

"Good! Good scheme!" cried half a dozen voices at once.

"Ain't it? Say, Jerry, got a pen an' ink erbout yer? Yer uster carry one, yer know."

"Ink's all gone, but I've got a pencil," answered the tramp, who had hastily gathered up the cards.

"Let's have it then."

Jerry handed over the pencil.

"Got any paper?" Blazer now asked of Joe.

"No, I haven't. What do you want of it?"

"Want you to write a letter to your old man, tellin' him to send up a thousand dollars if he ever wants to see you alive again."

"Wha—what! Do you mean to kill me?"

"We mean to make a stake out of you, bet yer life!"

"Father never'll pay. You'd better look out. He'll have the Wixfield rifles out after you before he'll do it. You'll see."

"Haw, haw, haw! Why, in that case they'll find your corpse," laughed Blazer. "Here, take this pencil and write to your dad, and be blamed quick about it, too."

"I haven't got anything to write on."

"Oh, white on your shirt-tail if you can't find anything else!"

"Cheese it, there's someone coming!" cried Jerry, holding up his hand.

There certainly was someone coming.

Outside on the walk the sound of hurrying footsteps was heard, and there came suddenly a woman's voice, raised in one sharp, piercing cry.

"Great gosh! What's this?" exclaimed Blazer, turning toward the door.

Joe could hardly wonder that he was astonished, for at the same instant a number of men, dressed like Indians, came bursting in upon them.

Following close upon this mob were two more, bearing between them the fainting form of a young girl. One glance at her pale but beautiful face was enough for Joe.

The courage which he had lacked for his own defense seemed to come all at once, now that it was needed for another.

"Carrie—Carrie Carleton!" he exclaimed.

And tearing himself away from the tramp who held him, Joe sprang to Carrie's side.

CHAPTER IX.

TOBY MAKES TROUBLE BY OPENING THE DOOR.

"Great golly, Miss Tillie! Yo' kean't expect me ter go out'n get skelped? Couldn't do it, nohow. I hain't got much hair, it's true, but what little I hev got I want."

And judging from the way in which Toby placed his back against the inside of the door of the quarryman's hut, he meant just exactly what he said.

Now, it was just about as much as Toby could do to make himself heard at all, for when all the girls of the Topcliffe Academy got to talking at once there was usually such a clatter that one found it hard work to hear himself think.

They were all talking together now.

All except poor Carrie Carleton, and they were talking about her.

"Really, Toby, you ought to go," protested Mrs. Sandford.

the housekeeper. "The boys have been gone nearly half an hour now. I'm most scart to death for fear the Indians have caught them, too."

"Kean't do it, mum! Think of my fambly."

"What nonsense!" cried Tillie West, who also had been trying to persuade the frightened darky to venture out.

"Perfectly absurd!" chimed in Susie Simpkins.

"Of course it is, Toby," said Mrs. Sandford. "Everybody knows that your only child is a man forty years old, and a good-for-nothing chicken thief at that."

"Now, mum! Now, mum! I want you to understand thet sich langwidge is actionable. I'se surprised at yo', Miss Sandford. Call my son a tief!"

"Toby, you're a coward!" cried Tillie West, "and that's all there is about it. If you won't go, I will. Get away from the door and let me out!"

"No, no, Miss Tillie! Kean't let you do it nohow! My conscience wouldn't let me," protested Toby.

"Here, girls! Help me pull him away! I will go."

"Nonsense, Miss West—you shan't go!" cried Mrs. Sandford. "It's bad enough, dear knows, to have one of our young ladies captured by those horrid savages without you being tomahawked, too."

Then they all began talking at once, until the interior of the hut became a perfect pandemonium, and Toby was driven almost wild.

Don't blame Toby.

He believed in the Indians, and being the only representative of the masculine gender, except a few little boys, felt it his duty to keep his forces concentrated inside the hut and defend the ladies to the last.

The instant Charlie Jenks departed Toby slammed the door and had kept it tight shut ever since.

Perhaps the ladies would have got the best of him now, if suddenly the attention of everybody had not been attracted by a thunderous knock on the outside.

"Indians! Indians!" screamed little Sam Savage, the youngest boy in Topcliffe.

"Indians!" gasped Toby, laying all over the door in his effort to stand up straight and keep a bold front.

As for Mrs. Sandford and the girls, they huddled together in the corner, a dozen shrill voices shrieking "Indians!" all at once.

Bang! bang! bang!

Louder than ever the knock was repeated, and a gruff voice ordered whoever was inside to open the door.

"G'way! G'way dar!" yelled Toby. "Kean't kum in hyar—no more stealin' gals! G'way!"

"Open in the name of the law!" cried the same stern voice outside. "Open the door, or I'll break it down."

"Good golly! Dat's dar's Mars Silas Minns, de sheriff!" gasped Toby. "T'ought I knew dat voice."

"Oh, if it only was!" exclaimed Mrs. Sandford.

"'Tis. I'm suah of it. Dat yo', Mars Minns?"

"Yes!" answered the voice. "Are you going to open the door or not?"

Toby did not hesitate a moment now, but his jaw fell, when throwing the door open he beheld standing outside not only Sheriff Minns, who had come in a wagon, but Professor Jeremiah Nixon, principal of Topcliffe Academy, as well.

"There they are! There are the vile conspirators!" cried Professor Nixon, bringing the ribs of a blue umbrella down upon Toby's nose. "Sheriff, I demand that you handcuff the whole crowd! I have been insulted and abused! I——"

"Hold up, profess! Hold up!" interrupted the sheriff, stepping in out of the rain. "You don't expect me to handcuff a lot of women and a nigger, do you?"

"You know your duty, sir! do it!" cried Nixon, loftily.

"Who yo' callin' a niggah, boss!" flared Toby, darting at the sheriff a furious look.

"Oh, Mr. Minns! I'm so thankful you've come!" gushed Mrs. Sandford, almost falling into the sheriff's arms in the excess of her joy. "There's been a whole tribe of wild Indians here! Oh, they've carried off one of our young ladies, and——"

"Hold on, ma'am! For Heaven sake, hold up and give me a chance. Indians—niggers—conspirators! Why, between you all I'm almost crazy. I haven't any use for none of you. What I'm after is Squire John Carleton, who has stolen twenty thousand dollars from the Wixfield bank."

"Liar!" cried a firm, manly voice, just outside the door.

And, to the amazement of every one, in sprang Jack Carleton with a bound.

"Take those words back, Mr. Minns!" he shouted. "Take them back! My father is no thief! I——"

But Jack was no match for Mr. Minns, apparently.

Suddenly the sheriff leaped forward, caught the boy by the shoulders, and pinned him against the wall.

"We'll find out who you call a liar, you little son of a bank thief!" he foamed.

"You're one if you call my father a thief!" cried Jack.

For a ghost Jack was decidedly lively.

Wrenching his right hand free by a sudden twist, he struck straight out from the shoulder, sending the sheriff sprawling at his feet.

CHAPTER X.

JACK IN JAIL.

"There he goes! There's the feller what licked the teacher! Look, Johnny, look!"

These words were shouted out by one of the small boys of Wixfield as Sheriff Minns led Jack Carleton, handcuffed, across the village green, followed by every idler who happened to see them after they left the jail.

Now, this may have been an honor, but Jack failed to see it.

The whole town seemed to know about the affair at the school.

Fact is, Jack had been locked up all night, and was not in a particularly cheerful mood, anyhow.

In spite of all his resistance, then, Mr. Minns had got the best of him, it seemed.

Yes, it was so.

You see, Professor Nixon was no child, and he took a hand in promptly collaring Jack after the sheriff fell.

And it all ended in Jack's being handcuffed and thrown into the wagon outside the quarryman's hut.

Appeals and protestations on the part of Mrs. Sandford and the Topcliffe girls were alike useless.

"I'm sorry to hear about the girl," said the sheriff, when they told him all about Carrie.

"Of course, those fellows were not real Indians. They are probably the scamps who broke into the property tent of the Wild West show which was exhibiting at Wixfield a few weeks ago. A lot of tramps, that's all."

"Bress my soul an' body! Guess you dunno nuffin', boss!" cried Toby. "Ef I ever seed an Injun in my life, I'se seen a dozen this hyar night."

"Nonsense!" put in Prof. Nixon. "The sheriff is right, unquestionably. They were tramps, but you need have no further fears. I will remain and protect you, ladies. In the morning effort shall be made to rescue Miss Carleton, though I must say it is but righteous judgment fallen upon her for resisting my authority. Yes, Mr. Sheriff, I have determined to remain. My duty lies here."

"Oh, the horrid thing!" seemed to float from the corner where the girls were grouped.

"Order!" shouted Professor Nixon. "Ladies, you have insulted me, you have defied my authority, but I propose to do my duty."

But stop! We do not propose talking about so uninteresting a person as Professor Nixon to the end of the chapter. Let us return to Jack.

The sheriff drove Jack down the mountain and over to Wixfield straight.

"Don't you do no talking to me, young man," he said, warningly. "Every word ye say 'll be used agin' ye. I want you to understand there's something more serious than Pappy Nixon's affairs in this arrest."

"Just tell me one thing, Mr. Minns," said Jack. "Do they really accuse my father of robbing the Wixfield bank?"

"Now they just do," answered the sheriff, "and what's more I guess there ain't no doubt but what he's guilty. He's got away with \$20,000 anyhow—mebbe more."

It was a tough night for Jack with that to think of, and poor Carrie's fate a matter of uncertainty beside.

To be sure, Mr. Minns had kindly promised him that he would send someone in search of Carrie at daybreak.

But even this assurance scarcely comforted Jack.

All night he paced the floor of the Wixfield lock-up in agony.

Most heartily did he repent having led the rebellion in Topliffe academy now.

In the morning Mr. Minns took Jack straight across the green to the court-house, and into Judge Bailey's private room.

Beside the judge, Squire Morgan, Joe's father, was present, and nearly all the directors of the Wixfield bank as well.

"Here's the boy, your honor," said Mr. Minns as they entered the room.

The judge peered at Jack over his spectacles.

Squire Morgan glared at him as though he were some new species of wild beast, at the same time taking a huge chew of fine-cut tobacco from a tin-foil package, and shifting his left leg over the right.

"John, where's your father?" he asked, in that deep voice of his which always scared the boys round Wixfield half to death every time the squire condescended to address them at all.

"Now, squire, be good enough to let me do the talking," said the judge, who did not seem one bit afraid of the big man of the village. "John, this is a serious business—a very serious business. If you know where your father is—and I believe you do—you ought to tell."

"But I don't know where he is," replied Jack, stoutly, "and if I did, I wouldn't tell."

"Tut, tut! Do you propose to defy the majesty of the law, young man?"

"My father is an honest man," cried Jack, losing control of himself completely. "Whoever says he robbed the bank, lies!"

"That will do!" said the judge with more moderation than might have been expected. "Young man, your father has always been my friend, and I regret his present position as much as any one can. Unfortunately, however, there is no doubt about the money having been taken. What we want is an explanation. We are all disposed to help him if he will only show himself like a man."

Now, don't think any the less of Jack when we say that there was something in the kindly tone of the judge which brought tears to his eyes.

"I—I—don't know where he is, sir," he answered. "I——"

"Stop," interrupted the judge. "Your father was seen on Plum Mountain yesterday afternoon by some men who were hunting. You also are known to have been on the mountain in company with young Beasley. There is but one conclusion to

draw. You went there to see your father. Now tell the truth. Is this so or not?"

"It was all an accident my being there, sir."

"Be careful, boy, be careful!"

"It's the truth, sir."

"Didn't you see your father?"

Jack hung his head in silence.

He could not tell the truth, and he would not lie.

Nor did the judge succeed in making him own it, either.

The end of it all was that Jack was sent back to jail on a charge of assault brought against him by Sheriff Minns, since they could hold him on no more serious charge.

Poor Jack.

He was plunged into the lowest depths of despair when he found himself back in the lockup again.

He almost wished that he had fallen down the full height of the precipice on Plum Mountain when the leather man struck at him, instead of catching a projecting ledge, as he had done, which enabled him easily to let himself down to the level below.

Even better would it have been, he thought then, if he had actually been on the tipping-stone when it went down into the swamp; for the fact was he had leaped off just before the stone fell, tumbling into some bushes below it, which saved his life, for the stone went harmlessly over his head.

Now, it seemed strange that Jack had not seen Jim Beasley nor Charlie Jenks.

But he had not, and the crashing thunder prevented him from hearing their shouts.

The fact is, Jack was almost beside himself about his father, and thoroughly tired out with his long tramp over from Plum Mountain.

By the time he had crawled up into the road the boys were gone, and never dreaming that anyone was in the quarryman's hut, scarcely knowing where he was, in fact, Jack just went in under a little shed which stood on the other side of the road, built to store giant powder in, and remained there until attracted by the approach of the wagon which had brought up Professor Nixon and Sheriff Minns.

Slowly the day dragged by and evening came.

Except the keeper of the lock-up, no one had been near Jack.

It had now grown dark in the room where he was confined—call it a cell if you wish, though it was hardly that—and the boy was beginning to wonder if the keeper was going to leave him so, or whether he would bring a light, when the door was suddenly unlocked, and a tall man enveloped in a long cloak of rusty back walked hastily into the cell.

"Jack, don't you know me?" he demanded, placing himself in the range of the lantern held by the keeper outside the door, at the same time throwing aside the cloak and pushing the slouch felt hat back from his eyes.

"Father!" cried Jack, springing toward him, "oh, father! Have they arrested you, too?"

"Hush!" breathed Mr. Carleton. "Jack, I want you. You have got to make an escape."

CHAPTER XI.

MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF MR. CARLETON AND THE IRON BOX.

What was it that had so startled Jim Beasley when he looked into the window of the leatherman's hut?

This must now be told.

Charlie Jenks did not seem to be quite so much disturbed by it; but then Charlie had been with Jim and Jack when they

visited the spot before, and there were some things that Jim knew which he did not.

"Why, it's Jack Carleton's father!" whispered Charlie, as Jim's head came pressing against the window beside his own.

"Of course it is!"

"And there's the old leatherman, too; and, phew! What a big lot of gold!"

Now this was the startling part of it.

Inside the hut Mr. Carleton sat on one side of a small table, and that most mysterious individual, the leatherman, on the other.

Between them was quite a large collection of gold pieces.

They formed a glittering heap, seen in the light of a lantern which stood on the table beside them—fives, tens, twenties, all tumbled together promiscuously in a pile.

Mr. Carleton seemed to be engaged in counting the money, while the leatherman was bending over an iron box on the floor, from which he presently took out another handful of gold, and threw it down upon the table with the rest.

"By George, that's curious!" breathed Charlie.

"Very!" answered Jim, dryly.

"What do you make out of it, Jim?"

"Don't know what to make out of it. Seems to me, though, Mr. Carleton acts mighty strange."

"I should say so. Do you s'pose it was him we heard hollering in the swamp?"

"Don't know, Charlie. I'd like to bet, though, that we saw the light of that lantern."

"By gracious, it beats me all out. Look at all that money, Jim. Where do you s'pose it came from?"

It was too much for Jim.

Of course, he could not help thinking of the ugly rumors against Jack's father that Joe Morgan had hinted at that afternoon.

"What shall we do?" asked Charlie, after they had watched Mr. Carleton counting the gold for several moments.

"I know what I'm going to do," said Jim, determinedly.

"What?"

"I'm going right in and ask him if he knows what's become of Jack. As to the money that's none of my business at all. But the leather man?"

Now, for some reason or other there was not a boy around Topliffe and Wixfield who was not terribly afraid of the leatherman, in spite of the fact that the strange old fellow was never known to do anyone any harm.

"Blame the leatherman!" answered Jim. "Who's afraid of him—I ain't for one."

"Think what he did to Jack."

"Well, he won't do the same to me, you bet. Come in, Charlie. Anyhow, Mr. Carleton ought to know about Jack and Carrie. I'm going to tell him—that's all."

"It's just as you say, Jim. You know I'm with you whatever you do, old man."

"I'm going to take the bull by the horns—that's what I'm going to do," said Jim, moving toward the door.

Now, what the result might have been if Jim had not tried to take one last look through the keyhole before putting his plan into execution, it is impossible to say.

But this was just what he did, and the outcome of it was as disastrous as it was unexpected.

As Jim pressed against the keyhole, the door, insecurely fastened, gave way suddenly, and sent Jim tumbling into the hut with Charlie on top of him—a most undignified entrance, to be sure.

"Great heavens!" ejaculated Mr. Carleton, springing to his feet as he wheeled about.

But the leatherman seemed more startled still.

He leaped up, and without a word jumped out of an open window at the back of the hut and disappeared in the darkness beyond.

"Jim! For God's sake don't desert me, Jim!" shouted Mr. Carleton. "This is only half!"

But there was no answer from the leatherman.

With a wild, hunted look upon his face the Wixfield bank president turned to the boys who were in the act of picking themselves up off the floor.

"Who the deuce are you—what do you want here?" he stammered, very much confused.

"Don't you know me, Mr. Carleton?" asked Jim. "We're looking for Jack."

"Jack! Ah, yes, ha! I—that is to say, you are James Beasley, are you not?"

"You ought to know me, Mr. Carleton, I'm Jack's chum."

"Yes, yes, I recollect you now. I—boy, what ill wind blew you here?"

"We're looking for Jack, and I'm afraid he's dead!" blurted Jim, showing just how he felt by his trembling voice.

"Jack dead! My God! Another punishment!" burst from the banker's pallid lips as he staggered back. "For heaven's sake, boy, tell me what you mean?"

But as might naturally have been expected, it didn't seem to make Mr. Carleton feel much better when Jim told him all there was to tell about Jack and Carrie.

He did not speak but once till the story was finished, however.

"Did he do that?" he breathed, when Jim told him about the leatherman striking Jack's hands as he hung over the precipice. "I wouldn't have believed it, but he's as crazy as a loon."

"What had we ought to do, sir?" demanded Jim, when he had finished his story. "You see, we were looking for Jack everywhere, and——"

"Yes, yes, I understand!" broke in Mr. Carleton, in an agitated way. "Perhaps it is just as well you came after all. Boys, you must help me carry this money down the mountain as far as Greenlee's, where I can get a wagon to take it to Wixfield. First of all that must be done. Yes, I'm glad you came, for I couldn't have carried this alone."

"But, Jack——" began Jim, when Mr. Carleton shut him up again.

"This matter must be attended to first," he said hurriedly. "Honor to me is dearer than my children—dearer even than my own life. Besides, it won't delay us any. We've got to get down the mountain anyway, and Greenlee's is the first house we come to. Here, boys, help me put this money back in the box."

Though he made no explanation whatever, the boys obeyed him.

The fact is, Mr. Carleton acted so much like a man who had taken leave of his senses that they hardly dared to refuse him, especially as Jim caught sight of a revolver thrust loosely in his coat pocket as he bent over the box.

In less than ten minutes they had all the money in, and Mr. Carleton closing down the lid of the box, locked it, and put the key in his pocket.

Up to this time he had not spoken another word.

"Now, boys, we will make a start," he said. "You two get hold of the rope handle on one side there, and I'll manage the other. In less than half an hour we'll be at Greenlee's, and then I'm ready to do all that man can do to find my boy and girl."

"How about the leatherman?" ventured Charlie.

"Never mind him," answered Mr. Carleton, shortly. "Let him go his own way."

And they started on theirs right away after that.

Dark as it was, and in spite of the storm, which still continued, Mr. Carleton seemed to know his way perfectly, and led them down the mountain by a much easier path than the one by which they had come up.

Until they reached the foot of the mountain all went well, but here a dilemma occurred, for the path ended abruptly against a huge ledge of rock with thick bushes on either side.

"Pshaw!" cried Mr. Carleton, angrily. "What's this? A blunder? We've taken a wrong turn. Run back, boys, to the place where we passed that big hickory tree, and see if there ain't another path going off to the right."

"How about the box?" asked Jim.

"Oh, I'll look out for that. Go, go, and don't be long."

Dropping the box upon the sodden earth, Jim and Charlie hurried back to the hickory tree.

It was just as Mr. Carleton had said.

There was the path, broader and better in every way than the one they had chosen. Jim wondered that they had not seen it before.

"I don't like this business, Charlie," he said, "but we've got to see it through. Let's hurry back. We can't be very far from Greenlee's now."

Now, Greenlee's was a farm-house which stood on the Wixfield turnpike at the foot of Plum Mountain.

Though Jim was entirely right in supposing that they were near it, the boys were not out of their difficulties yet.

Back to the rocks they hurried.

"By thunder! as true as you live he ain't here!" ejaculated Jim, as they reached the spot.

"Nor the box neither!" echoed Charlie. "It was only a dodge to get rid of us, Jim."

And, indeed, it looked very much that way.

Mr. Carleton and the box of gold had alike disappeared.

CHAPTER XII.

JOE GETS THE BEST OF BLAZER, THE TRAMP.

"Carrie! Carrie!" called Joe Morgan in a hollow whisper, peering through the open door.

The door led into the upper rooms of Luke Lockyer's deserted house—the tramps' home it might better have been called.

Joe was in his stocking feet and carried his shoes in his hand.

He had pried the door open with a piece of old iron, making as little noise as possible in the operation.

He fully believed that Carrie Carleton was behind that door, but as there was no answer when he called—not even after he had called a second time—he began to wonder if after all he had made a mistake.

Stealing cautiously into the room Joe ventured to strike a match and look around.

"By gracious! She ain't here," he murmured. "They've carried her away. This is the last room on the floor, and if she ain't here she can't be in the house nowhere! Yes, they've carried her away and I'm left."

And Joe gave a great gulp as though there was a big lump sticking in his throat.

"It's no use trying any more," he muttered. "Best thing I can do now is to light out myself, get back to camp, and if Jack's there let him know what's happened. By thunder, I wish I'd never quarreled with Jack!"

The match was out now, and Joe backed toward the door, passing into the hall just in time to run plumb into the arms

of a man who, with a sharp exclamation of astonishment, seized the boy by the throat.

"Who let you out?" hissed the voice of Blazer, and the tramp shook Joe as a dog would shake a rat.

But Joe was desperate, and in no mood to be knocked down at the first blow.

"You shan't stop me! You shan't!" he shouted, loud enough to have been heard on the roof.

Exerting all his strength he wrenched himself free, and struck Blazer between the eyes with all his strength.

He hit better than he thought for.

With a deep groan the man dropped to the floor, falling with a noise which seemed to shake the whole house.

"Hello, Blazer! What's the row up there?" came a voice shouting from below.

"Help, Jerry! The Kid's done me up!" groaned Blazer.

"Great heavens! here is the whole gang on top of me," breathed Joe, making a dash through the hall, where he had previously seen an open window.

He was none too soon.

Jim, Jerry, and half a dozen others were at the head of the stairs before he reached it.

Without losing an instant, Joe slung his legs through the opening, clutched the sill for a second, and then dropped into the garden below.

"Stop him! Stop him, boys!" came the shout.

Joe saw them coming through the door. There were three of them now.

He made a dash for the fence, and vaulting over it, ran with the speed of the wind. That night's lesson had been a hard one for Joe. Harder than any lesson he had ever studied in Topcliffe Academy.

When he tried to defend Carrie at the time of the girl's sudden entrance in company with the Indians, he had been "knocked silly," as the saying goes, by a single blow of Blazer's fist.

The next thing Joe knew they had him a prisoner, with his hands tied behind him, and Blazer and Tim were dragging him upstairs.

He could see that two of the supposed Indians were forcing Carrie up ahead of him, but that was about all he had time to see, for he was dragged into a room right at the head of the stairs, while Carrie was pushed further along the hall.

Now, Joe did two things of special interest in that room, one wise and one which would have been decidedly foolish, if he could have helped doing it, which he could not.

He wrote the letter to his father and also one to Mr. Carleton, telling him about Carrie.

A thousand dollars was the price the tramps set as the ransom of each.

To be sure, Joe did this with a revolver at his head, so it would be hard, perhaps, to call it a foolish act.

The wise one was when he pretended to be asleep, and kept up a snoring so successfully that Blazer, who was watching, went downstairs and left him alone.

This was just what Joe had been figuring on.

How he managed to free his hands, how he found the iron bar, and not only let himself out, but opened every other door on the floor, searching for Carrie, are things we shall not stop to tell.

It is enough that he did it—did it with the tramps right in the room underneath him, and we have seen the result.

"Great heavens! What did they do with Carrie?" panted Joe, as he ran on through the woods, listening to see if he could catch the sound of his pursuers.

He could now hear nothing, however.

It began to look as though the tramps had given up the chase.

Joe didn't blame them, either.

Dodging here and doubling there, he had led them in a run that they were not likely to forget in a hurry.

"I s'pose I'm a blame coward to go off and leave Jack's sister anyhow," thought Joe, as he made the best time he could toward the camp. "Can't fight more'n a dozen or two, though. I'll get all the fellows together and we'll go down and clean the place out. There were no Indians—only some of the gang fixed up."

It was nearly midnight when Joe came bursting into the camp on Mink Mountain.

He had gone right past the quarryman's hut, never guessing that any of his party might be there.

"Hello, Joe! By time, we thought you'd deserted!" cried Mat Andrews, who was watching while the others slept.

"I ain't one of the deserting kind, Mat. Oh, I've had the very old deuce of a time. Where's Jack and Jim?"

"What! Don't you know about Jack?" inquired Mat, with a great show of astonishment.

"No. What? Ain't he showed up by this? He and I had a little muss, but——"

"Oh, 'tain't that," interrupted Mat. "Jack's arrested. The sheriff took him and lugged him off to jail."

"What!" roared Joe, so loud that almost every boy in the bunks started up.

"It's just as I tell you. Old man Carleton has robbed the Wixfield bank, it seems, and Jack's mixed up with it."

"It's a lie!" cried Joe, louder than before. "It's a base lie! Jack had nothing at all to do with it. Jack in jail! Great Scott!"

"That's where he is by this time," said Mat, who didn't like Jack, and seemed to take a great deal of satisfaction in telling about it.

"Then he shan't stay there if I know it!" shouted Joe. "Jack is my friend, if we do quarrel! Let's rescue him, fellows! We'll pull the old jail down, but we'll have Jack out!"

CHAPTER XIII.

SIRE AND SON.

"Father, father! Why don't you speak?" reiterated Jack, for the tall figure which had entered his cell simply stood there staring at him.

"Jack—my son—how came you here?"

The words came slowly, and were accompanied by certain choking sounds which showed that Mr. Carleton was greatly moved.

"Why, Mr. Downs arrested me last night, father. They accuse me of helping you to rob the bank," replied Jack.

"No, Jack, no!"

"It's a fact!"

"Dear me, dear me!" exclaimed Mr. Carleton, wringing his hands and pacing the cell, "this is all very terrible. Trouble, trouble, more trouble. I'd be obliged to you if you'd leave us alone a little while, Joe. I'll make it all right with you some of these days."

This remark was addressed to the jailer, who had just put his head in at the door.

"You made it all right with me years ago, Mr. Carleton, when you saved me from going to the bad through drink, and got me into this place," replied the jailer in a whisper. "I only looked in to say, sir, not to speak so loud. There are one or two

others in the cells to-night, and they might overhear you, sir, and give the whole thing away."

"All right, Joe, all right. I'll be careful."

"If you wouldn't think hard of me, I'll just lock you in, sir. Some one might come in suddenly to see your boy—the judge or Squire Morgan, for instance. If they found the door open, it would excite suspicion. In such a case, you could hide under the bed, you know, and——"

"Yes—yes! Do anything you like, Joe," interrupted Mr. Carleton hurriedly, "only leave me a few minutes to talk with my son."

The key turned in the lock, and the jailer hurried away, leaving sire and son alone.

For Jack the delay had been a good thing, for it gave him a chance to recover from his first great surprise and fully collect his thoughts.

"Look here, father," he whispered before Mr. Carleton had time to speak, "before you say another word, I want to know the truth. Why are you dodging about, hiding in the woods, and——"

"Stop, Jack!"

"No, I won't, either. I want to know—I must know! To outsiders I'd defend you to the last gasp, but I feel that I have a right——"

"To know the truth, I suppose you are going to say," interrupted Mr. Carleton. "Well, Jack, I suppose you have, and so you shall."

"That's all I want. Did you—did you——"

"Did I rob the bank, my boy?"

"Yes."

"Jack, to you I will confess my sin. I did."

"Oh, father!"

"No use denying it to you," continued the banker with enforced calmness, "nor have I any disposition to deny it to the world if I find I cannot make good the losses of these poor people who trusted in my honesty. It is only because I hope to do this that I am acting in this seemingly underhanded way, my son."

"I can't understand it, father!"

"It is very simple."

"But how did you ever come to do it?"

"The same as a thousand other weak but well-intentioned men have robbed those who trusted them, Jack."

"But you, father, you!"

"Oh, I'm no better than anybody else, my boy. You set me up for a saint, but I'm as big a sinner as the next one."

"What did you do with the money?"

"Speculated in Wall street, and got cleaned out, that's all. First it was my own money, and when that was gone I began using other people's—that's the whole story, Jack."

"It's terrible!"

"Ain't it? But listen to me, for I want to get to the point at once. Where is Carrie, Jack?"

"God knows, father. They say she was carried away by Indians. I——"

"Indians! Nonsense! there are no Indians round here."

"I know it. I——"

"Hold on! It must be those infernal tramps, Jack! They robbed me last night, I'm sure of it. But for them I'd be able to face the world now. They have been searching all day for your sister. Look here, my son, I've got a strange story to tell you, and you must listen attentively, for your honor as well as my own depends upon it, and there is Carrie's safety to be considered, too."

"I'll do anything in the world you say, father."

"Listen—listen!"

And Mr. Carleton began a story which filled Jack with the most intense surprise.

Long they talked—moments lengthened into hours, and still Mr. Carleton seemed to find plenty to say.

Twice the jailer looked in upon them, but the banker was not ready to depart.

At length he arose, and grasping Jack's hand, pressed it warmly.

"It is all settled, then," he said. "If I cannot accomplish it, I shall give myself up and take the consequences."

"I don't see what else you can do, father."

"There is nothing else to be done."

"If I could only go with you."

"No, it cannot be. It would expose this honest man to—hark! What is that?"

Outside in the street a loud shout had suddenly arisen.

"Open the door! Open the door!" voices were saying. "Open the doors, or we'll break them in—we mean to have him out!"

"Merciful heavens!" cried Mr. Carleton, turning pale.

"Sounds like a mob!" echoed Jack, springing off the edge of the cot where he had been sitting.

"That's just what it is."

"What do you suppose they went?"

"Want? Why, they want to lynch me for robbing the widow and the orphan! God help us, Jack! What shall I do?"

"Open the door! Open the door!" roared the voices again. "Carleton! Carleton! We want Carleton! Open the door!"

At the same moment the jailer appeared at the grating as pale as death.

"I'm afraid there's going to be trouble, Mr. Carleton!" he exclaimed in agitated tones. "The street is full of people—they are all calling for Carleton! For Heaven's sake what am I going to do?"

The words were scarcely spoken when a furious pounding began.

"There they are! There they are!" cried the jailer. "It is the mob banging on the door!"

CHAPTER XIV.

"DON'T YOU DARE TO TOUCH THAT ROX!"

Excellent reasons existed why Joe failed to find Carrie when he searched the upper rooms at Luke Lockyer's.

Briefly stated, the girl was not there, nor had she been for an hour or more.

Tim the tramp could have explained the whole mystery.

It was Tim who came sneaking into the room where Carrie had been confined during the time that Joe was busy planning escape, so you see it is not always safe to take things as they seem.

When Carrie saw the shock-headed, ragged fellow come sneaking into the room she was beside herself with terror.

"What do you want?" gasped the poor girl, retreating to the most remote corner. "Don't you dare to come near me! Don't you dare!"

"Oh, say, that's all right," growled Tim. "You needn't be afraid of me, miss. I'm a brick, I am—a regular brick. I've come to set you free."

Of course, Carrie jumped at the suggestion. She never stopped to think how unlikely it was that this man should be any more tender-hearted than his companions.

"Will you really?" she exclaimed. "Oh, I'd be ever and ever so much obliged to you if you only would."

"Course I will," answered Tim, gallantly. "I couldn't bear

it no longer to see you a sufferin' so, miss. You just stick to me, and I betcher yer won't regret it."

"Come where?" stammered Carrie, drawing back with a slight shudder, as the tramp approached her; for however good Tim's intentions might be, the fact remained that he was horribly ragged and distressingly dirty, besides which he smelt of rum.

"Why, back ter the place we toted yer from, of course."

"Take me home—please take me home!"

"Jest as yer say; it don't make a pin's difference to me. Only trouble is won't the old man clap me in jail?"

"Oh, no; not if I ask him not to! Do you suppose he would do anything like that after you had helped me?"

"Waal, it's hard to say. Nobs like him is mighty cranky sometimes. But come on. The fellers is all busy over a game of peanuckle jest now, so this 'ere's our chance."

"Oh, but I can't go without Joe Morgan," breathed Carrie. "After what he did to defend me, it wouldn't be right."

"Come on! Come on, and stop yer clacking," answered Tim, so roughly that Carrie did not dare to say another word.

Besides, the fellow had caught her arm with a grip positively painful, and Carrie felt that to resist would have been dangerous.

He hurried her downstairs and through the front door without being detected, and almost before the girl had time to realize it they were in the woods, with the rain pouring down upon them in full force.

"Oh, dear me, this is dreadful!" Carrie exclaimed. "I shall be drenched!"

"'Tis kind of rough, I'll allow. We'll hev to git inside somewheres."

"No, no! Let us hurry on."

"On to where?"

"To Wixfield, of course. I thought you promised to take me home?"

"Not much!" cried the tramp. "Think I was born yesterday? Oh, no! I'm just going to run you into a snug little hole I know of, and then write yer daddy that onless he shells out I'll marry you. Dunno but what the best thing would be to marry you anyhow, and ask papa-in-law to take us in. Holy gee! wouldn't that raise ructions, though? Ha, ha! The way I've euchred them other fellows is great!"

Carrie's heart sank within her. Her whole soul seemed filled with an agony of fear.

Struggles and persuasions were alike useless. In spite of all she could do the poor girl was dragged on through the rain for more than an hour. It seemed as though Tim would never stop.

He did not do much talking now, the fact is he was past that, frequent pulls at a bulbous black bottle which he carried in the tail pocket of his ragged coat had not been without effect.

Fancy Carrie's situation after that.

"S' all right, my dear!" stammered the tramp, when at last they found themselves in a thicket so dense that there really seemed to be no way out. "S' all right—don't be scart! The road's just beyont here! Think I don't know the way? Guess I do. Yer can't lose me in these 'ere woods."

Carrie was almost past speaking, she was so utterly fatigued and faint.

All at once a mist seemed to come before her eyes—she was stumbling.

"Brace up! Noner that now!" cried Tim, flinging his arm about her. "Don't try ter come none of yer fainty business, with me!"

But a sober man couldn't have kept Carrie from fainting then, for she was gone already. It was something more than

a faint, too. It was a swoon brought on by fatigue and fear. When she came to herself there she was lying upon a pile of hemlock boughs, with the tramp nowhere visible.

The rain had ceased, and the stars were coming out, Carrie could see them shining among the branches above her as she started to her feet and staggered forward, scarcely knowing what she was doing.

In a moment she had stumbled over something, and only with the greatest difficulty kept herself from going down.

It was the body of a man which lay stretched across the path. At a glance Carrie recognized her drunken companion, Tim the tramp.

He appeared to be dead, for when she touched him he did not move, and his flesh felt cold.

By his side, with his arm flung partly over it, was a small iron box, which stood open, and from the battered appearance of the lid, looked as though it might have been broken open with a stone.

Was it a ray of starlight which struck into the box as Carrie bent over it?

It was a ray of light from somewhere, and it struck full upon something yellow and glittering within—in short, the box was full of gold.

"What can it mean?" murmured Carrie. "There must be ever and ever so much money in that box! Where did he get it? What has happened to him? Oh, what am I going to do?"

Too many questions to be answered in a breath, and even if there had been anyone to answer them there would have been no time, for at the same instant the bushes parted, and out stepped a short, stout man, with long hair and beard, and dressed in coarsely made garments of leather from head to foot.

Carrie gave a scream and started back.

"Stop!" cried the man, extending his hand, in which a long, keen-bladed knife was clutched.

"Stop! Don't you make a move, young lady; and, above all, don't you dare to touch that box!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE TOPLIFF RIFLES MARCH TO TOWN.

"Attention, company!"

Every boy registered in the roll book of Topcliffe Academy straightened himself up at the word of command.

"Shoulder arms!"

Up went the guns, their polished barrels glittering in the starlight.

The fact that they were not loaded, and that not a solitary cartridge could have been produced by the entire force of the Topcliffe Rifles, did not make their appearance any the less imposing.

It was evident from the determined way in which Joe Morgan gave the order "forward, march!" that there was important business on hand.

"Stop! Stop, boys!" roared Professor Nixon, from the steps of the boarding-house. "Stop! I command it!"

"Ah, go soap your head!" shouted a dozen voices from the ranks as the company moved on.

"Three cheers for the rifles!" screamed the shrill voice of Tilly West from one of the upper windows.

And when the boys glanced upward there were all the academy girls looking out and waving their handkerchiefs vigorously.

None of them responded to Tilly's enthusiastic demand for

cheers, but when Jim Beasley shouted "three cheers for the ladies," all the boys went at it with a will, and the "rifles," wholly regardless of Professor Nixon's angry protests, which were still being hurled upon them, marched off down the hill and took the road to Wixfield, where Captain Joe gave the order for the "double quick."

It was the night of the day following the breaking away, and Topcliffe Academy still found itself in a thoroughly demoralized condition.

Indeed, Professor Nixon had no more control over his pupils than any outsider might have exercised, and down at Wixfield everyone was too much excited over the bank robbery to respond to his call for help to put down the rebellion in the school.

On the morning following the storm, when Jim Beasley and Charlie Jenks, who had passed the remainder of the night at a farmhouse, returned to Topcliffe with the full intention of going on to Wixfield to see if they could hear anything of Mr. Carleton or Jack, they were not a little astonished to find that all the campers had returned, and to learn that Jack was safely lodged in jail.

Not that Professor Nixon had been instrumental in bringing the school back to its old quarters in Topcliffe Academy.

By no means.

The tyrannical master had nothing at all to do with it.

It was Joe Morgan, thoroughly ashamed of the part he had played, who took the lead. As soon as they reached the academy Joe called the boys and girls together, and the lady teachers joining them, it was solemnly resolved that under no consideration would they ever again attend the school while Professor Nixon had charge.

That was the first meeting, and Jim and Charlie were just in time to attend it.

A second was held late in the afternoon, after Joe returned from a trip to Wixfield. This was a secret conclave into which girls were not admitted.

After it was over every boy quietly retired to his dormitory and remained there.

They knew there would be no supper, because Professor had given Toby peremptory orders to do no cooking.

Perhaps the professor thought he could starve the boys into submission. If such was the case, he must have been greatly astonished when all at once, somewhere about ten o'clock, he was startled by the rush of feet upon the dormitory stairs.

He flung open the door and beheld to his amazement the boys go flocking out upon the lawn, each with one of the academy rifles. Protests proved quite useless.

The more he talked the more the boys laughed at him.

He was still protesting when the Topcliffe Rifles marched down the hill.

"What do you suppose Old Nixey will try to do about it, Joe?" asked Jim Beasley, who was first lieutenant of the company, and, somewhat contrary to the generally accepted custom, marched by the captain's side.

"Blest if I know, and I don't care."

"We may be all jailed ourselves before we get through with it."

"So much the more reason why we should pull the old shebang down then before they have the chance to clap us into it."

"Say, Joe, you are a terrible fellow. I would never dare to undertake such a desperate thing alone."

"Oh, bother! They can't arrest the whole lot of us; besides, my father runs the town. If any trouble comes of it he'll get us off."

"What did your father say when you saw him this morning?"

"Wouldn't talk to me at all. He was as mad as thunder about the breaking away. 'You've got yourself into trouble, young man,' was all he did say, and if that's a fact, Jim, why, a fellow might as well get hung for an old sheep as a lamb. Dress up there, you fellows, dress up. You're straggling all over the road."

There was a general scrambling back to place as the order was shouted out.

"I'm with you anyhow, Joe," said Jim. "It ain't regular, I suppose, but——"

"What?"

"I think you ought to do it, because——"

"Because I picked a quarrel with Jack? Because I let those tramps get Carrie away from me? Spit it out, old man. You can't say anything to make me feel meaner than I do now. That's one thing sure."

"Oh, I didn't mean——"

"Hold on. No matter what you meant. If Carrie Carleton ain't found it's the last you'll see of me around these parts, Jim Beasley. That's all."

They were still talking when the column struck Main street. Only a few hundred rods now lay between them and the jail.

We neglected to mention that a large party had been beating about the mountains all day searching for Carrie.

Joe and Jim would have joined them, but it scarcely seemed necessary, and would have upset their plans about Jack.

Thus far Jim and Charlie, by common consent, had kept the story of the leather man and the gold strictly to themselves.

It was after eleven when the rifles struck Wixfield. Not a soul was stirring as they marched down Main street and gained the jail, which occupied the lower story of a large, old-fashioned frame building, the upper part of which served as the town hall.

How still it was! How bright the stars shone!

"By thunder, Charlie, I feel like a burglar," whispered Jim to Charlie Jenks, as Joe gave the command: "Company halt!"

Instantly every boy came to a dead standstill.

Now the order previous had been "single file," and the one which followed was "front face!" which brought the boys in a line before the jail door.

Joe jumped up on the big horse-block by the town pump, and waving his sword, shouted:

"Any fellow who's afraid to follow me to the end, let him stand out now—it's the last chance!"

Not a boy moved.

"Bully!" cried Jim, "they are game, every one of them!"

"Knew it!" echoed Joe, jumping down. "We'll have Jack or bust!"

He walked straight over to the big door of the jail, and seizing the bell handle, rang a furious peal.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE MISER AND HIS GOLD.

"Don't touch it! Don't touch the gold! Whoever touches it gets bewitched like me. I told Jack just how it would be."

It was the leatherman who spoke.

He stood peering out of the bushes at Carrie, brandishing the long-bladed knife in a decidedly unpleasant fashion.

Yet strangely enough the girl did not feel half so much afraid of him as she had done of Tim, the tramp, who had only threatened her in words.

"What are you shaking that knife about for?" she demanded, and she was surprised at her own boldness. "Do you mean to kill me with it?"

"Yes, if you put your hand on the box I do."

"But I ain't going to put my hand on the box."

"You'd better not."

"It is your box, I suppose?"

"It was my box; I gave it to Jack."

"Who is Jack?"

"Why, don't you know? There is only one Jack. Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha!"

It was horrible to hear him laugh. He raised the knife and made as if he would throw it at Carrie's head.

Influenced by a power for which she could scarcely account, the girl kept her eye steadily fixed upon the man and stood her ground.

It was fortunate that she did so. If she had but known it, this alone saved her life, for had she turned he would surely have rushed upon her and plunged the knife into her back.

Lunatics are a good deal like lions—to control them you must hold their eyes.

Carrie had heard of the leatherman many times as a dangerous lunatic who wandered about the woods and mountains, robbing hen roosts and frightening women, and though she had never seen him before, she recognized him instantly—but, indeed, she could scarcely help doing that.

"Don't—don't look at me so!" whined the man after a moment. "Your eye is like a corkscrew—it seems to twist into my soul. Take it off—take it off!"

"I will when you put up that knife, not before."

"Oh, well, I'll put it up then—there now, you can't see it. I was going to stick this dirty pig again, but no matter. I guess it ain't necessary—he's dead."

The knife vanished somewhere about his singular garments, but it did not better matters for Carrie a bit, for before the poor girl had time to move the leatherman made one leap forward and seizing her by both hands with a grip of iron snapped a pair of rusty handcuffs about her wrists.

The instant this was done he backed away again, and Carrie, to her horror, found that there was a jack chain attached to the handcuffs, the other end of which the leatherman now proceeded to wind about his own wrist.

There was no help for Carrie now. The lunatic had her fast.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!" he shouted. "I've got you! Get away from me if you can! I'll keep you till Jack comes back! Ha, ha, ha!"

Bending down beside the tramp he hastily shut the lid of the box, which he then placed under his arm, and plunging into the thicket, started off at a rapid pace, dragging the frightened girl after him at the end of the chain.

It was a frightful situation for Carrie.

Really, it seems quite remarkable that the poor girl did not go mad.

Entirely powerless herself, she was hurried into the forest, over stones and swampy ground, through dense thickets, which tore her dress to ribbons; at last the foot of a steep ascent was reached.

Of course, Carrie screamed for help, but that was only at the start.

None came, and after the first few moments her terror became so intense that she could not utter a sound.

Soon they were ascending the mountain, the leatherman going more slowly.

It was all Carrie could do now to keep herself from stumbling, and she often wondered afterward why she had not fallen forty times before the end of that strange journey came.

It was over at last, and she found herself standing before the lonely hut from which Jim Beasley and Charlie Jenks had helped Mr. Carleton take the gold, and now for the first time since they started her strange captor spoke.

"Here we are!" he exclaimed. "I've brought you home. Go in."

He flung open the door and dragged the trembling girl inside, then closing it behind them, he made the end of the chain fast to the latch, and flinging himself into a chair, laughed long and wildly—there was something fairly blood-curdling in that laugh.

"Now I've got you! Ha, ha! You pretty creature, now I've got you!" he shouted. "I'll keep you till Jack comes and then I'll astonish him. It's no use to try and get my gold away. It comes right back to me; comes back with interest. You are the interest. Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho!"

There was a lamp burning on the table, and as the light struck upon the face of the leatherman Carrie made a strange discovery, which not only startled her, but at the same time gave her hope.

In spite of the curious dress of the leatherman, in spite of his heavy beard and wild, distorted features, he bore a most striking resemblance to her father—she could see that at a glance.

What could it mean?

Carrie was puzzled to know; but the mere fact that it was so seemed to give her courage.

Something seemed to tell her that her only safety now lay in keeping perfectly cool.

"What are you going to do with me?" she asked, bravely. "Why have you brought me here? I never harmed you."

Again the leatherman laughed.

"Certainly not," he answered. "How could you? The devil protects his own, and I sold myself to him long ago. What am I going to do with you? Why, keep you till Jack comes—that's all."

"Whom do you mean by Jack?"

"Don't you know?"

"No. How should I?"

"You ought to know. I mean Jack Carleton, of course."

"My brother!"

"No, no, no! Not your brother—my brother! My dear brother, who branded me as a thief, and now is one himself. Ha, ha, ha!"

"You mean my father?"

"Your father—is Jack Carleton your father?"

"My father is John Carleton."

"Ho, ho, ho! Then you're my niece! Oh, this is great—immense!"

Carrie's amazement now was at the highest pitch.

Could it be possible that this man was her uncle?

She could dimly remember hearing that her father once had a brother who became insane. Now it came back to her like some half-forgotten dream.

She had but little opportunity to ponder on it, however, for the discovery seemed to affect the leatherman most powerfully.

"So, so! Then you are my niece!" he exclaimed. "Jack's daughter! Well, I see it in your face now. Strange I did not recognize you at first."

Carrie jumped at this as a drowning man will catch at a straw.

"Then you will let me go!" she pleaded. "Oh, please do let me go."

"No, no! So much the more reason why I should keep you till Jack comes. If I let you go you will only lose yourself in the woods. I'll tell you what I'll do, I'll hide you with my gold."

"I don't understand what you mean."

"No, of course you don't. I'll show you, though. I'm a miser—at least that's what the world would call me. I love everything pretty; gold is pretty; it is so yellow and shines so. You are pretty too, but in a different way. I'll hide you."

He pushed aside the table, and stooping down, proceeded to open a trap door in the floor beneath it.

Then, taking up the lamp, he unhitched the chain from the latch and ordered Carrie to descend.

There was no help for it.

When the poor girl refused, out came that long, glittering knife again.

Filed now with a thousand fears, she obeyed, finding herself after a moment in a low studded cellar beneath the hut.

"Here we are! Here we are!" cried the leatherman. "This is my treasury—behold!"

He waved the light above him, disclosing to Carrie's astonished gaze a sort of bin built up against one wall of the cellar. It was piled high with stones, among which gold pieces lay scattered by hundreds.

"There it is!" exclaimed the leatherman. "There it is! Gold! gold! gold! Some in the rough, just as I dug it myself, more made into money, but all gold—bright yellow gold!"

He seemed to grow wilder in his way of speaking as his eyes turned toward the glittering pile.

Grasping the iron box by the bottom he turned it upside down and dumped its contents into the bin.

Then, making fast the end of a chain to a stout wooden post which supported the floor above, he ascended the ladder, the

trap was heard to close, and poor Carrie found herself in darkness and alone.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE ATTACK ON THE JAIL.

Bang! Bang! Bang!

It was the butt of Joe Morgan's rifle thundering against the door of Wixfield jail.

"Carleton! Carleton! We want Carleton!" snouted a chorus of twenty voices.

No wonder the defaulting bank president within thought the cry was intended for him, when in reality it was meant for Jack, and no one else; which only goes to show how badly mistaken the best of us may often be.

Now, do not for a moment suppose that such an uproar could take place in the quiet streets of a town like Wixfield in the dead of night, and the inhabitants not be aroused.

In less than three minutes windows were thrown up in nearly every building surrounding the common; five had not passed when people began to appear hurrying toward the jail.

"Now, then, fellows," shouted Joe, "this job has got to be put through in a hurry. First thing you know we'll have the whole town down on top of us."

"That's what's the matter," echoed Jim Beasley. "They are coming now."

"Hey! Hallo, there! What are you about, you young rascals!" shouted the voice of Judge Bailey, who being a bachelor, lived in rooms attached to his office in the Barnwell block which adjoined the jail.

"There's the judge! We're in for it now!" cried Will Edgar.

"Never mind him! We're going to put this thing through or bust!" roared Joe, who was a terribly determined fellow in whichever way his mind was bent, "what we want is to break down this door."

It was easier said than done.

In answer to Joe's first ring the jailer had appeared, and opening a little wicket peered out.

But he shut it again in a hurry, for the shout of "Carleton! Carleton!" which arose alarmed him terribly, knowing as he did that the defaulting president of the Wixfield bank was at that very moment inside the jail.

After that the Topcliffe rifles banged and hammered away unavailingly, for the jailer did not show himself again.

"We've got to be spry, fellows, if we're going to do anything!" shouted Joe. "Lay on to the door here, the whole lot of you! We're wasting time!"

"Hold on! I'll tell you a better plan," interrupted Jim. "Let's yank up the awning post and use it for a battering ram."

"Good! Good for you, Jim!"

A dozen voices joined in the shout.

The awning post referred to stood in front of the post office,

which occupied one corner of the big building that included the jail.

In a moment all the boys had gathered about it, and in spite of the fact that it was deeply bedded in the earth, their united strength was enough to root it up.

"Form a line round us, a dozen or so of you!" roared Joe. "Here come the town fellows! Keep 'em off!"

It was certainly a time for action. Already a dozen men and boys had reached the scene.

But the Topcliffe boys were equal to the occasion. No better drilled military organization was ever attached to a school.

While Jim, Joe, Charlie Jenks, Will Edgar, and others seized the uprooted post and hurried with it to the door, their companions surrounded them in a compact semi-circle with presented rifles.

"Keep 'em back, boys! Keep 'em back!" cried Joe.

Then bang! bang! bang! went the post against the door.

The confusion in the square was increasing every moment now.

Men were shouting and women screaming from the windows. Judge Bailey, who had hastened downstairs in his shirt sleeves, was vainly trying to make himself heard.

"Read the riot act to them, Jedge!" roared one.

"Where's the sheriff? Why ain't he here?" yelled another.

Then somebody howled out that the sheriff was off on the mountains searching for the Carleton girl, and this only seemed to stir up the crowd still more.

"T-o-p-l-i-f-f-e! Rah! Rah! Rah!" yelled the boys in chorus, giving the school cry as the awning post went thumping against the door.

"What are they after?" asked Mr. Rose, the fat butcher, who came waddling up all out of breath.

"After Squire Carleton, the bank thief," answered a town boy.

The butcher jumped up on the horse-block and yelled at the top of his voice:

"Don't stop 'em! Don't stop 'em! Let's have him out! Lynch him! Lynch him!"

This turned the tide completely.

"Lynch him! Lynch the bank thief!" was shouted on every side.

"By thunder, Joe, things are getting hot!" exclaimed Jim Beasley. "They think it's the old man we're after, and——"

But Jim's sentence was cut short, for at that moment the big door was seen to sway—the next and it had fallen inward with a crash.

"Rah! Rah! Rah! T-o-p-l-i-f-f-e! Rah! Rah! Rah!" yelled the academy boys.

Even if Joe had been disposed to restrain them, they could not have done it.

Followed by the townspeople, they went pouring into the jail.

Now, there was nothing very pleasant in all this for Jack and his father at the other side of the door.

Joe, the jailer, had turned the key in a hurry, and let Mr. Carleton out of the cell.

Jack followed him, and heedless of the loud demands of old Ned Ousley, the town drunkard, the only other prisoner, who was bellowing through the wicket in the door to know what the row was about, they hurried along the corridor to the office.

"Look out, father! Don't let them see you! Oh, what shall we do?"

"Lynch him! Lynch the bank thief!" the crowd were yelling. The thumping on the door was loud enough to be heard half a mile away.

"Great God! I'm afraid it's all up with me, my boy!" breathed Mr. Carleton, hollowly.

He ventured to peer through the window, but one glance at the surging crowd outside was enough.

"Why, it's the Topcliffe fellows!" echoed Jack, who had been looking over his shoulder. "There's Joe Morgan at their head, and Jim Beasley, too."

"Colonel Morgan is my most bitter enemy, Jack. He is probably at the bottom of all this."

"Squire, you'll have to make a move if you're going to save yourself!" whispered the jailer. "It's my opinion that there door won't stand much more."

"What can I do? I can't get out in front."

"No, but there's more than one way out of the jail."

"Do you mean the creek?"

"Yes."

"Is there a boat?"

"Unfortunately no; but I reckon you can swim."

"It will have to be so. Jack, you must come, too."

"No, by thunder, he won't!" interposed the jailer. "Hain't you got no thought erbout me, squire, after what I've done fer yer, too?"

"But——"

"'Tain't no use talkin'. The boy's in my charge, an' he's got to stay."

"Go, father, go!" breathed Jack. "Never mind me."

"But they'll kill you, Jack—they'll kill you because you are my son."

"I ain't afraid."

"Are you coming or not, squire?" demanded the jailer, impatiently.

"I suppose I'd better go, Jack."

"You must, father."

"You'll join me at the hut."

"Yes—yes."

"God help you, boy, and God help your poor sister. I shall spend the whole day looking for her. Good-by."

He wrung Jack's hand, and followed the jailer down the narrow stairway leading to the cellar beneath the hall.

"Get back to your cell," called the jailer. "Get back quick. I'll be on hand to lock you in before the door gives way."

Jack hurried through the corridor with a feeling of intense relief.

He knew that the jail backed up on Duck Creek, a small stream, which flowed through the center of Wixfield, that the

cellar, though underground on the street side, opened on a level with the creek in the rear.

For his father to swim the creek would be mere child's play, and once across it would give him an excellent start.

"I'll play it off on them somehow, so's to keep 'em back all I can," thought Jack, as he hurried toward his cell.

But it was too late for any plots now.

Before Jack could gain the cell, a loud crash behind told him that the door had fallen.

"Rah, rah, rah! Topcliffe! Rah, rah, rah!"

It was the old academy cry.

One glance backward showed Jack the Topcliffe boys, rifles in hand, pouring into the jail like sheep, Joe Morgan at their head.

"By thunder! I'll hold 'em as long as I can, anyhow," thought Jack.

He seized a three-legged stool, and planting himself across the corridor, waved it above his head.

"Stand back there, Morgan!" he shouted. "Don't you lay a hand on me, Beasley. I'll brain the first fellow that advances another step!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE THREE CHUMS TOGETHER AGAIN.

"Carleton! Carleton! Give us Carleton!"

Like so many sheep following their leader, men and boys were pouring into Wixfield jail.

"Lynch him! Lynch him!"

It came like an echo to the first cry, scarcely disturbing Jack, for he felt that by this his father should be in the act of swimming the creek.

"Look out, Morgan! Jim Beasley, you're against me, too! You'd better keep back!" he shouted.

"Hold up, Jack! We've come to help you!" cried Joe.

"Don't, Jack, don't!" echoed Jim. "We're your chums! Great Scott, he has killed Joe!"

For the stool which Jack had raised to defend himself went flying through the air, taking Joe Morgan alongside the head with a force which sent him reeling to the floor.

"You confounded fool! What did you do that for?" roared Jim.

But Jack, without heeding, ran further along the corridor, anxious to draw the crowd as far away from the cellar door as possible.

The boys rushed after calling for him to stop; their loud shouts mingling with the cries of lynch him from the town people behind.

Jack fought desperately—fought against his friends.

Town boys and the Topcliffes were turned against one another before they knew how or why, and to add to the confusion some fool rang the big fire bell, just outside on the common, its deafening clangor drowning all other sounds.

"Jack! Jack! For Heaven sake listen!" roared Jim Beasley. "We are your friends."

Jack was struggling with three fellows who had managed to get hold of him after no little difficulty.

It is doubtful if he would have heard Jim had not Joe come hopping up shouting:

"Hold up, Jack! For God's sake hold up! They've got your father. We'll help you to rescue him. It's the rifles, Jack; can't you understand?"

Now questions and answers flew thick and fast for a moment.

At last Jack understood, but it was too late. Down at the other end of the corridor near the office the crowd were pressing about a tall figure enveloped in a long, black cloak.

It was Mr. Carleton, who had been caught in the very act of leaping into Duck Creek.

"Lynch him! Lynch him! Hang him to the big butterwood tree!" the crowd were yelling.

"He's robbed us all! Run him out, boys, run him out."

"Great God, have mercy! My poor father!" groaned Jack, almost paralyzed with fear.

"Fellow townsmen," rose the clear, ringing tones of Mr. Carleton above the clamor, "friends—for you were once my friends—all I ask is one day's grace—one day more of freedom, and I will pay every creditor of the bank the last penny. I mean just what I say."

"He lies—he lies!" roared the mob. "Hang him! Lynch him! Set him up for a mark! Chuck him in the creek! No, no! Get a rope—hanging is the best."

Matters were growing desperate now. They were dragging Mr. Carleton through the door.

But Jack had not been tamely listening while all this was going on.

"Jim! Joe! if you are really my friends, now is the time to show it!" he shouted.

"We'll stand by you, Jack!"

"Bet your life we're with you, old man!"

"Topliffe!—Topliffe! Rah, rah, rah! Three cheers for the Three Chums! Rah, rah, rah!"

Joe first, then Jim, every boy among the rifles joining the "rah!" at the end.

What were they saying?

It is not always easy to understand when twenty or thirty excited schoolboys are all talking at once.

The next thing the mob knew, though—it was just as they had seized the banker and were dragging him out into the square—the voice of Captain Joe was heard shouting:

"Charge bayonets!"

Then there was a rush and the ringing school cry drowned all other sounds.

"Look out for the rifles!" roared someone.

Bayonets there were none, but half the crowd thought the boys had them and would use them, too.

In two minutes the jail was deserted and the Topliffes were driving the "towns" through the square.

"Look out for your father, Jack!" whispered Joe as they

tore Mr. Carleton out of the grasp of the butcher and another dragging him back among the academy crowd.

"No, no! Better give me up, boys! It's no use! You'll only get yourselves into some trouble," protested Mr. Carleton, who had evidently lost heart.

"I say yes!" cried Joe. "Run him back, boys! We'll guard his retreat."

"You'd better go, father!" pleaded Jack.

"It's just as you say, John, but you must not think of going with me. If they catch me, I am lost, but you——"

"But, father——"

"I am firm, boy! Either I go alone or not at all!"

"Now's your time!" shouted Jim. "Drop that cloak and dodge across the common. They'll never catch you if you're sharp!"

"So be it, then. Boys, I'm off!" cried the wretched man.

The ranks of the rifles opened and let him through, and he disappeared amid the darkness of the common behind.

Meanwhile the Topliffes were driving the towns before them, using their rifles as clubs, and facing a perfect shower of stones.

The trouble at the jail had developed into a first-class riot, and there is no knowing how the affair might have ended had not the Wixfield militia company suddenly come wheeling round the corner of Washington street with Judge Bailey at their head and Squire Morgan marching by his side.

"In the name of the law I order you to disperse!" roared the judge.

"Disperse or we'll sweep the streets!" echoed the squire.

There was no nonsense about it this time. The "towns" saw that the militia meant business, and taking to their heels in a few moments had vanished to the last man, while the Topliffes, acting under Joe's orders, stood four abreast, with their rear resting on the common fence.

Squire Morgan strode forward in his rage.

"Joe, you young rascal, come here!" he roared.

"I'm right here, sir!" answered Joe, for his father was really close behind him, and to have moved a step would have been to get further away.

"What do you mean by this? What do you mean?" stormed the squire, attempting to seize him by the collar.

"Don't touch him, squire!" interposed Jack and Jim at a breath, throwing themselves in front of Joe.

"It's no use kicking, father. We three are chums, and we propose to stand by each other!" exclaimed Joe, stoutly. "We came down here after Jack and we've got him. We're going back to Topliffe now."

"Bully for you, Joe!" shouted several voices, some of which came from the ranks of the militia, the squire felt sure.

"Do you know you've broken the laws of this State, and I am responsible."

"Can't help it; you'd no business to have Jack locked up!"

"Don't dictate to me, boy."

"I ain't dictating. I'm only stating a fact."

"Where's that thief of a Carleton?"

"Don't know."

"You shall suffer for this, Joseph. I tell you——"

"Hold on," whispered the judge, "all this don't amount to anything. Let's leave the two companies to look after each other, and take these boys up into my office, where we can talk matters over quietly. Carleton has escaped, and they must be made to tell where and how he went."

This was agreed upon.

To have attempted to oppose the militia would have been mere folly.

The three chums submitted quietly, and accompanied Squire Morgan and the judge to the latter's office in the Barnwell Block.

There the whole story came out, and a stormy scene between Joe and his father ensued.

Jack very sensibly held his tongue during this controversy, thinking it time enough to speak when he was spoken to.

"By the living Cæsar, Joseph, I'll send you to the school-ship!" roared the squire, at last, after considerable "fencing" had gone on between father and son. "You have broken up the academy, you have assisted in the escape of a rascal, you ——"

"Hold on a minute! There's no use in going on this way," interrupted Judge Bailey. "Let me talk to Jack."

"Do as you like," snapped the squire. "For my part, I say the whole three of them would be served just right if they were sent to State Prison for ten years."

"There, there. Keep your temper. Jack, how came your father in the jail to-night?"

The judge's tone was kindly. Jack was drawn toward him at once.

"I don't know positively how he got in, sir," he answered, "and it wouldn't be right to tell if I did."

"That is so, my boy. Stick to those who stick to you—I don't blame you a bit. But you can tell me what he came for?"

"He came to see me, sir."

"Yes, yes; but he must have had some special reason."

"My sister is lost, sir. God knows what has become of her. Isn't that reason enough why father should want to see me?"

"Yes, yes. It is dreadful about your sister. I sent a party after her this morning. They have not returned as yet, and—but I cannot talk of this. Your father, boy—where has he gone?"

"And I cannot talk of that, sir. But there is something I do want to say, though."

"Say it, say it."

"Only give me a chance, sir, and father will pay every cent he owes."

"Hopeless! hopeless! You don't know about it, Jack. Your father is a ruined man."

"I mean what I say, judge. All I ask is——"

"What, what? Spit it right out, my boy."

"Let us all three go. Don't stir up the school matter for one day more, and——"

"And what?"

"And by twelve o'clock to-morrow father and I will be in your office ready to pay every cent."

"Nonsense!" cried Squire Morgan. "Rubbish of the rankest sort. He only wants to gain time for his father to get out of the State—that's all!"

"I mean just what I say, gentlemn," protested Jack, stoutly.

"And I believe you, my boy!" exclaimed the judge. "Not only that, but I am going to trust you. It's an appointment, Jack—at twelve o'clock."

"At twelve o'clock I will be here anyhow, money or no money!" answered Jack. "Joe—Jim, you are with me, boys?"

"To the last gasp, Jack," answered Joe, in spite of his father's sneers.

"You don't have to ask me, Jack," was all Jim said.

Fifteen minutes after that the Topliffes marched out of town with flying colors.

"By thunder, we've done what we set out to do, anyhow!" cried Joe, as they filed down Main street. "We've got Jack."

There was no denying it. The three chums were together again at the head of the line.

As they passed the jail the shouts began:

"Topliffe! Rah, rah, rah!"

Where were they going?

Not back to Topliffe, for they turned down Dale street, which, if followed, would take them to Plum Mountain by the shortest cut.

CHAPTER XIX.

CAPTAIN TOBY AND HIS TROOPS ON THE MARCH.

"Clar ter goodness, Miss Tillie, dat am a fac'! He done gone seen 'em! Suah's ever yer born he seen 'em! But now de boys is all gone, what we gwine ter do?"

Toby, with his white cook's cap cocked rakishly over his left ear, and his eyes winking like a jumping jack's, stood just outside the main door of the young ladies dormitory, which, as the hour was only six a. m., and none of the occupants of the dormitory supposed to have arisen, was a very reprehensible thing for him to do.

Evidently Miss Lott and Miss Carpenter thought the same, for their voices could be heard inside ordering Tillie West and Susie Simpkins away from the door to which they had hurried in response to Toby's resounding knocks.

"Young ladies! Young ladies! This is positively shocking!" exclaimed Miss Lott, as her head joined Tillie's and Susie's behind the infinitesimal crack which was all the insight into the dormitory that Toby was allowed. "Come away at once, and let me attend to this matter. Now, then, Toby, what do you want?"

Toby grinned from ear to ear.

"Clar ter goodness, miss, I didn't mean no disrespect," he answered. "Dat ar Jim Weedon boy he done tole me he seen de leatherman a-draggin' Miss Carrie up Plum Mountain long 'bout midnight. T'ought youse outter know."

"What! what! What's all this?" exclaimed Mrs. Sandford, bustling up outside.

Then Toby had to tell the story over again, and before he finished the Topcliffe girls had overpowered Miss Lott and were clustering about him with a great display of curl papers and dressing-gowns, all talking in high-pitched voices at once.

"Why, it's just too dreadful for anything," cried Tilly. "Something ought to be done right away."

"If the boys were only back," echoed Susie.

"We ought to tell Professor Nixon," added Lizzie Price. "That dreadful leatherman may kill poor Carrie a dozen times over before we can get help from town."

"Girls, it ain't the slightest use to tell Professor Nixon," put in Miss Carpenter, elbowing her way to the front. "By the time we get him to make a move Carrie would be as old as my grandmother. I'll tell you what I would do!"

"What?"

"What, Miss Carpenter?"

Susie spoke first, and after her Tillie—there was a perfect chorus of whats after that.

"I would go after her myself!" exclaimed Miss Carpenter. "If the boys can rescue Jack, what's to hinder us from doing the same thing with Carrie? We'll form a company, girls, with Toby for captain, and start at once."

"Splendid!" cried Tillie.

"Just too elegant for anything!" echoed Susie.

"What will Nixey say?" said Lizzie Price.

"Golly, leddys, he's done gone got past saying anything!" exclaimed Toby. "Yo' needn't 'spect no trouble from him."

"Why not, Toby? What do you mean!" demanded Mrs. Sanford, who had just given her assent to the plan.

"Why, 'caze he done gone dranked up two bottles ob wine, mum, an' now he's ersleep on de sofy—dat's why. Lordy, mum! Yo' might fire a couple ob cannon in his ear an' he'd never wake up!"

"Then let's go!" screamed Tillie. "We ought to do something for Carrie when the boys are off working for Jack."

Only Miss Lott objected, but she was overruled.

Soon all was bustle again on the lawn outside.

The girls looked positively bewitching in their walking suits. Plans were all arranged, and Toby was stirring about at a tremendous rate.

"Get inter line dere, young leddys! Get inter line!" he shouted. "If I'm gwinter captain dis 'ere company, I'se got ter be 'beyed!"

"Oh, let me be captain; you'll see how I'll make 'em mind," cried Tillie.

"No, no! I insist upon Toby, if I'm going!" exclaimed Mrs. Sandford; and Toby it was.

Twenty minutes more were consumed in getting ready, and shortly afterward Captain Toby and his amazons were on the march.

The programme was to go to Greenlee's, where the boy Weedon lived, who had seen Carrie and the leatherman on the mountain.

After that all was uncertainty.

"Pen's upon what the boy sez," Captain Toby declared.

When they reached Greenlee's the boy was there, but as a vast amount of time had been wasted in getting the wagons from Mr. Downs, it was now almost nine o'clock.

Did we mention the wagons before?

Of course you don't suppose for a moment that fat Mrs. Sanford could have walked all the way from Topcliffe to Greenlee's.

Why, she was so used up as it was that she declared she could not stir another step.

"Nebber mind! We'll get on widout her!" said Toby, as the second start was made.

The girls were in single file now, with Toby and the teachers in advance.

They were steering straight for Plum Mountain, and by Toby's side walked the boy who had seen Carrie and the leatherman the previous night.

"Oh, Tillie! ain't it just dreadful?" exclaimed Susie. "What would you do, dear, if you were in Carrie's place?"

"Do! I'd scratch his eyes out!"

"Pshaw! You are very brave! Why didn't you scratch the Indians' eyes out when they captured Carrie at the hut! You were just as much scared as anyone else."

"Susie, it ain't so. I—oh, dear me! What shall I do now?"

"What's the matter?"

"My—there's something broken—my skirt's coming off, now there!"

"That's nothing. Let's slip into the bushes and I'll pin it. We'll catch up with the other girls in a couple of minutes. Say, Tilly, look at Toby, how pompous he is marching at the head of so many girls."

"Oh, pshaw! Never mind Toby—I want to fix my skirt."

They hurried into the bushes by the roadside, but scarcely had the alder branches closed behind them than Toby was startled by a succession of shrill screams.

"The leatherman! Help! Help! Toby! Toby! The leatherman!"

"Good golly! Wha's all dis?" cried Toby, stopping short.

"It's the girls—it's Tillie and Susie! There—there!" screamed Lizzie Price.

It was broad daylight, and there were too many eyes upon him to render it safe for Toby to act the coward now.

"Come on! Who's afraid?" he shouted.

Nobody seemed anxious to move, though, so Toby and the boys broke into the bushes themselves, stumbling upon Tillie and Susie before they had gone ten steps.

The girls were clutching one another's hands, and screaming:

"Toby! There he is!"

"Good golly, so he be!" echoed Toby, for his eyes rested upon the singular figure of the leatherman leaning against a tree with something that looked like a bundle of old clothes at his feet.

"Hain't he teched yer?" demanded Toby.

"No! No!"

"Golly? what yer heart of, den? Hello, dere, boss! Hallelu!"

No answer from the leatherman.

With his head bowed he stood there motionless against the tree.

"Why don't yer speak when a gem'an 'dresses yer?" demanded Toby, mustering up courage to advance a few steps further. "Hain't yer got no manners? Hain't—good golly! What's dat?"

Toby jumped back fully five feet, and the girls gave another spring, for what they had taken for the bundle of clothes at the foot of the tree suddenly rose up and faced them.

"Mistah Carleton!" cried Toby, who knew the banker well.

"Hush!" whispered Mr. Carleton, who was deathly white, raising his finger and speaking wildly. "Hush! Don't disturb him! Don't you see he's dead—dead—dead? And I'm going to die, too!"

He raised a cocked revolver suddenly, and pressed it against his pallid brow.

CHAPTER XX.

CARRIE'S TROUBLES THICKEN.

"Ha, ha, ha! Ho, ho, ho! Ha, ha, ha!"

When the leatherman laughed it seemed as though he meant all the world to hear him.

Poor Carrie in the cellar strained her ears to catch the sound as it died away in the distance.

And though the laugh was fiendish, Carrie half wished she might hear it further, for it is a horrible thing to find oneself a prisoner in darkness alone.

An hour had passed since the leatherman dropped the poor girl into the cellar and left her there chained to a post.

During all that time Carrie scarcely dared to move, for the strange man above her kept tramping up and down, and every now and then would open the cellar door and shout some ridiculous nonsense or other, winding up in every case with that dreadful laugh.

"Ha, ha! Ho, ho! Ha, ha!"

At last he was heard to open the door and start down the mountain, still laughing as he went.

"Oh, I can't stay here! I can't stay here!" breathed the unfortunate girl, in an agony of terror.

And in the first moments of this rush of fear she even called to the leatherman, begging him to come back, but got no answer, of course, for he was far out of hearing.

Not that the girl was so much afraid of the dark, or thought much upon her sad situation. It was rats she feared, and though there was probably not a rat on the mountain, her imagination pictured them all around her, and she struggled desperately to get free.

It amounted to nothing, though, for the chain held her fast.

An hour of agony passed, and morning dawned before Carrie, from sheer fatigue began to quiet down.

Not that she knew it was morning, for no light penetrated

into the cellar. As soon as calmness came, common sense began to return with it, and Carrie set about doing what she ought to have done in the first place—to try, in a sensible way, to get free.

How was the chain fastened?

This was the first question.

Her struggles had only resulted in winding it so tight around the post that she could scarcely move; but now she unwound herself carefully, thinking what she was about, which she had not done before, until at last she had it out at its full length.

Next she did what she ought to have done in the first place, followed the chain up to its end to see in what manner it was fastened to the post.

This brought a discovery which sent hope thrilling through poor Carrie's heart, for the chain was only fastened by an ordinary hook passed through one of the links, precisely as a madman might have been expected to fasten it.

In a second Carrie had unhooked it and was free.

"What a fool I was not to do that before?" breathed the girl. "It's all right now. All I've got to do is to find the stairs and get out."

She groped for the first step, and presently discovered it. Cautiously ascending, she managed with some difficulty to raise the trap, and in a moment found herself standing in the glorious sunlight of the room above.

Be very sure she lost no time now. Without even stopping to close the trap she hurried out, and looked about for the path leading to the valley beneath.

It was right before her, trodden hard by the feet of the leatherman, who had been ascending and descending for years.

"If only I don't meet him on the way," thought Carrie, "I ought to be able to reach the school inside of two hours. I wonder if there is anyone there, or if they are all on Mink Mountain still?"

Without wasting a moment, however, she started down the slope.

Poor Carrie! Her troubles were not over yet.

For the first two minutes her way lay over barren ledges, from which she could see to a great distance all about her; this passed, she plunged into a strip of forest where it was almost as dark as night.

It was right here that Carrie suddenly became aware of the disagreeable fact that she was not alone.

Somewhere voices could be heard using language anything but elegant.

Naturally the girl thought of the tramps, and, frightened beyond all telling, sprang aside into the bushes on the right, only to find too late that she had made a fatal mistake, and run right into the lion's mouth.

There they were—Jerry Blazer and all the rest. They seemed to rise up before her like so many specters, with their red, bloated faces and their rags.

"Holy smoke! It's ther gal again!" cried Blazer, and then, to Carrie's amazement, there stood Tim with a dirty cloth wound round his head, his face as pale as death, but still very much alive.

"Grab her, boys! Grab her!" he shouted as Carrie started to run. "I'll bet you what you like that she knows where old leather's hid his gold."

They were upon Carrie before she knew it, Blazer caught her by the waist, and Tim, who certainly exhibited a good deal of strength for a dead man, seized her hands and tied them behind her.

"Let's get her back and make her tell what she knows. No fear of leather now, nor no chance of getting the secret out of him neither—dead men tell no tales."

"That's what's the matter!" echoed Blazer, as they dragged poor Carrie out into the path.

CHAPTER XXI.

JUST IN TIME.

"Stop! Stop! Oh, Lordy, Massa Carleton! What yo' gwinter do?"

It was really brave in Toby considering the fear he felt of a cocked revolver to jump forward and wrench the weapon from Mr. Carleton's hand in the way he did.

As for Tillie and Susie, they could only stand still and scream, and as their screams brought all the girls into the bushes, the secluded wood was crowded in a moment.

Meanwhile the leatherman never moved nor raised his head, but just stood there leaning against the tree as the girls had first discovered him, with a tiny stream of blood upon his leather coat in the region of the heart.

"What did you do that for, you black rascal!" cried Mr. Carleton, furiously. "Give me back that pistol. I'm going to kill myself. Give it back, I say!"

"Not much, boss!" answered Toby, at the same time giving the revolver a fling off into the bushes. "These ere leddys is in my charge, an' don' yo' forget it. Thar hain't gwinter be no killin' did hyar!"

Mr. Carleton groaned and pressed his hands to his forehead.

"Oh, my God! Why did you do it?" he murmured. "Why didn't you let me kill myself? Don't you see they have killed my brother? There is no help for me now. He would have given me money, as it is I am lost—lost!"

"Mr. Carleton—Mr. Carleton, be a man, sir!" exclaimed Miss Carpenter, moving forward and taking the banker by the arm. "Remember you have a daughter. Think of Carrie! She is in great danger. There is your son, too, and you do not want to forget yourself."

"Carrie! Yes, yes! Carrie! What of her?" exclaimed the banker, controlling himself with a desperate effort. "Has she been found?"

"She has not. We are on the way now to the hut where she is said to be confined."

"What hut? Oh, I am almost crazy!"

"The leatherman's. That man there!"

"She is not at the hut. She cannot be there."

"I bet yer she is, mister. I seen the leatherman a-haulin' on her up the mountain last night!" cried the boy, Weedon.

"Can this be possible?"

"It am a cole fac', boss!" put in Toby. "Say, what's de matter wif de leatherman? Is he raaly dead?"

"Can't you see for yourself? He is dead and cold, tied to the tree."

"Golly! Who killed him?"

"I don't know—I suspect the tramps who have been prowling about these woods disguised in the Indian costumes they stole from the show which was at Wixfield some weeks ago. You see him just as I found him. Oh, James! Oh, my poor brother! Yours has been a strange life!"

"Was he really your brother, Mr. Carleton," Miss Carpenter asked.

"Yes, yes! But I can't stay here. We can do nothing for him. Let us hurry on to the hut and see about my daughter. There is something else to be attended to there besides—something of the highest importance. Come—come!"

"Specs we'd better go," said Toby, who had been examining the body of the leatherman which was bound to the tree with a stout rope.

He had been tied first and stabbed to the heart afterward, it seemed. Certainly it looked like more of the villainous work of the tramps. If Carrie had been there she would have suspected Tim.

"Yes—yes! Let us go at once," said Mr. Carleton. "I shall be caught by the sheriff, probably, but no matter. Better be in the penitentiary for life than live as I have had to live for the last few days."

He kept close to Miss Carpenter, as they now started again on their way up the mountain.

The kind-hearted teacher would have liked much to have said something to comfort him, but as Mr. Carleton maintained a moody silence she did not like to speak.

It was just the same with the girls. Even Tillie, the irrepressible, was not able to do more than whisper now and then to Susie Simpkins that it was "just too awful for anything," and when Tillie could not talk things were certainly in pretty bad shape.

"Faster—let us go faster!" exclaimed Mr. Carleton anxiously, when about half way up Plum Mountain they gained a level stretch. "If my poor girl is in the hut—ha! what is this?"

The sound of a drum had suddenly made itself heard, and mingled with it came the shrill notes of a fife, tuned to "The Girl I Left Behind Me."

"Hark!" cried Mr. Carleton, raising his hand suddenly. "There are a lot of people coming up the path that leads to Wixfield. Oh, God! what shall I do?"

"Stand your ground like a man, sir," said Miss Carpenter. "If you are innocent, you need have no fear."

"Ah! there is just the trouble!" groaned the banker. "I am guilty—guilty! I have robbed the widow and the orphan, but I would have restored all if—oh, heaven! It is Jack!"

The rattle of the drum and the tooting of the fife had grown louder while he was speaking, and now a line of gleaming

rifle barrels appeared, carried on the shoulders of a company of boys.

Jack, Jim, and Joe, the three chums, marched at the head of the line, and right behind them was Charlie Jenks, playing "The Girl I Left Behind Me" as though his life depended upon it, while Hen Tucker whanged away furiously at the drum.

"Golly! It's dem free rapscllions—Jack, Jim, and Joe!" shouted Toby. "Now we'se all serene!"

"Wait—they don't see us yet!" said Mr. Carleton. "I think—yes, they do, too! Oh, Jack! Jack!"

For Jack had suddenly dashed forward and thrown himself into his father's arms.

"Father! Father! You mustn't stay here an instant!" he exclaimed, excitedly. "Mr. Downs, the sheriff, and his searching party are right behind us. You want to get out of this at once."

"No, John, I will not go," replied Mr. Carleton, more calmly than he had yet spoken. "Your uncle is dead—murdered. All chance of assistance from him has vanished, I fear; but be that as it may I am determined to face the music like a man."

* * * * *

Meanwhile, in the leatherman's hut poor Carrie was having an exciting time of it to say the least.

Positively the poor girl was past screaming. Indeed, she was so dazed with all that had come upon her that she scarcely realized the lapse of time, and was amazed when Tim, looking at the sun, announced that it must be almost ten, adding that they had better make a move if they were going at all.

Of course, she had told about the gold. How could she help it?

Now, a start was made, and at last they reached the leatherman's hut, where the attention of all was attracted immediately to the open trap, just as might have been supposed.

The tramps tied her to the sink and all went down together. There was their great mistake.

Tied by the waist and arms, there was nothing to hinder Carrie from using her feet, and no sooner had the last tramp disappeared down the trap than she kicked the door back into place, and without the least difficulty, managed to shoot the bolt.

"Confound you, gal! What you doin'?" roared Tim's voice from the cellar.

Bang! bang! bang!

In an instant blows were showered on the trap thick and fast.

"Help, help!" screamed Carrie, whose ears had at that moment caught other and more welcome sounds.

Before she could pronounce the word the third time the door was thrown violently open, and in rushed a host of friends.

"Father! Jack! Oh, father!" screamed the poor girl, and after that she knew nothing until she found herself supported by her father, with the hut crowded to its utmost capacity; so full, in fact, that Sheriff Downs and a number of others had to stand outside the door.

"Thank God that you are safe, my child!" exclaimed Mr.

Carleton. "This moment is worth more to me than all your uncle's gold!"

"Gold—the cellar is full of gold, father!" gasped Carrie, raising up.

"You don't mean it, child! The noise we heard then——"

"The tramps are down there, father!"

"Ah! Then it was they who tied you. I see! I see! Jack!"

But Jack had turned and was facing the rifles.

Raising his hand he waved it frantically.

"The gold's in the cellar, boys! Let's have it!" he shouted.

CHAPTER XXII.

CONCLUSION.

"Ten minutes to twelve, judge," said Squire Morgan, looking at his watch, "and no sign of that young rascal yet."

"That's all right, Morgan. Give the boy time. He'll be on hand, I'm sure."

"Don't believe it," growled the lawyer. "Like father, like son."

"Jack is smart. You can't deny that."

"Oh, no. I don't deny it. He's too smart for you, judge. I almost wish my boy Joe was like him, instead of the milksop he is to write that letter. I'll never forgive him for that."

And the squire brought his fist down hard upon an open letter which lay upon the judge's desk, which had come in the morning's mail.

Suddenly the loud beating of a drum and the shrill notes of a fife made themselves heard.

"By George, Morgan, it's the boys as sure as you live!" cried Judge Bailey, stepping to the window and looking out.

"I'll be whipped if you ain't right, judge!" replied the squire, joining him. "And by all that's brassy, there's old man Carleton walking between Jack and Joe at the head of the line!"

"Just twelve o'clock!" exclaimed the judge as the town bell rang out the noon hour. "Jack Carleton has kept his word."

Two minutes later and the judge's office was full of people. Even the stairs of the Barnwell block were jammed, and the crowd extended into the street.

Very pale but very determined, Mr. Carleton separated himself from the others, and stepped up to Judge Bailey's desk, throwing down a folded paper upon it.

"Judge," he said, "take that and hold it, using the proceeds for the benefit of the bank creditors. I am ready to give myself up now, but no one will lose a dollar, thanks to the energy of these boys."

Judge Bailey took up the paper, and opening it, proceeded to scan its contents for a few moments in silence.

"Well, well, well! This is wonderful!" he exclaimed.

"What—what is it?" demanded the squire.

"Oh, nothing much, only the will of that strange character the leatherman," replied the judge. "He turns out to be Car-

leton's brother, and leaves him a good hundred thousand, that's all."

Of course, there was no more talk of arresting Mr. Carleton now.

One hundred thousand dollars to meet an obligation of \$20,000 leaves a snug little margin. Mr. Carleton was still very far from being the ruined man he had supposed.

In a day's time every obligation was settled for. Judge Bailey took an assignment of Mr. Carleton's claims against his brother's estate, and personally advanced the money to pay off the bank creditors in full.

Equally, of course, there was no use trying to keep any part of the matter secret, so on the following Friday the Wixfield Free Press came out with a full account of the whole affair.

It told how James Carleton, better known as the leatherman, had years before robbed his brother in the part of the country from which they had originally come; how, later, he had become a perfect miser, and yet a miser with methods, as certain shrewd investments showed, for the gold in the bin formed but a small part of the estate, which turned out to amount to over \$200,000 when all was disclosed.

Of course, the sheriff would not let Mr. Carleton touch the gold after the tramps were captured, as they speedily were—and it was known that the leatherman was dead.

Fortunately, however, the will of the leatherman was found in an old desk, which, as it left everything to the banker, enabled Jack to keep his appointment, as we have shown.

Tim, Blazer, and Jerry went to the penitentiary for long terms. The former, narrowly escaped the gallows, felt pretty well satisfied with his sentence, too, for he confessed to having killed the leatherman, but claimed that the crime had been committed in self-defense, and that when he tied the man to the tree he was not dead.

As there were no witnesses, and Carrie's testimony showed that the leatherman had nearly killed Tim earlier in the night, the tramp got the benefit of the doubt, and so escaped the full penalty of his crime.

Days passed, and changes took place at Topliffe.

Professor Nixon was shown to be a dissipated tyrant, and was dismissed in disgrace.

Shortly after that there was a meeting of the trustees of Topliffe Academy, and who do you suppose was chosen principal in Prof. Nixon's place?

Strange as it may appear, it was Mr. Carleton. The man was a college graduate, and perfectly well qualified for the position. His usefulness as a bank president and a business man had departed, and he had to turn his hand to something else.

Besides, Squire Morgan stood his friend, and would have it so, and as the squire owned a half interest in the academy corporation, his wishes went a great way.

"I feel that I ought not to take it, Jack," said Mr. Carleton to his son, on the evening after the choice was announced.

"I think you ought, father. The boys all want it so, and as for the girls, I haven't heard a dissenting voice among them."

"Well, well, I suppose I must yield, but after what has occurred——"

"No matter about that, father. Don't let the subject ever be alluded to again, though before we drop it I would like to ask you a question or two."

"Ask what you like, Jack. Ask what you like."

"Did you know the leatherman was your brother all the years he went tramping round the country?"

"Certainly, Jack. But don't let us talk of him. After I buried poor Jim in our family lot I made up my mind never to speak of him again. You think I profited by his death, boy—I want you to understand that the money I received was less than half of my share of our father's estate out of which he wronged me, and—but there! I'll say no more. Let the dead rest in peace."

"Yes, but one word, father. Why did uncle come here?"

"I don't know, Jack—never did. He was a strange mortal. No man could fathom him. Look at the worthless stones found mixed with the gold in the bin; look at the way he treated Carrie—that tells the tale."

"Then he was crazy?"

"Of course. I knew it. Still, when I found myself in trouble I resolved to hunt him up and beg his help. And it is only just to him to say that he gave it, Jack. There was \$20,000 in that box which young Beasley helped me carry away from the hut."

"How came you to lose that box, father?"

"How? Why, we missed the road, and I set the box down to go after the boys. No sooner had I turned my back than that wretched tramp who was hanging near seized it and made off. I chased him, but did not catch him, and then—but there, I am not going to talk more."

Nor did he ever again on that subject, so there is nothing left for us but to bring our story to an end.

In due time Jack, Jim, and Joe graduated with equal honors. Later Jack married Tillie West, and Joe Jack's sister Carrie. Jim, jilted by Susie Simpkins, remains an old bachelor still.

Mr. Carleton is still principal at Topliffe, and has made the school a grand success.

Toby has been gathered to his fathers, and there are little Jacks and Joes at the school now who call the white-haired old professor "grandpa," and besides this——

But really we have said enough, and simply adding that the Three Chums are chums still, must write

THE END.

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